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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

November 23, 1892.

No. 735.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers.

93 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LVII.



Buffalo Bill and His Merry Men;

OR,

The Robin Hood Rivals.

A Romance of Forts, Fastnesses and Frontier Retribution.

BY COL. PRENTISS INGRAHAM.

CHAPTER I.

THE ROBBER'S FATE.

THE strange spectacle was presented of a man in ambush wearing the uniform of a captain of cavalry in the United States Army, and lying in wait, lasso in hand, to catch a horseman riding toward him at a slow pace.

All unconscious of danger lurking behind the group of rocks by which his trail led, the horseman rode slowly along.

There was a look upon his face of triumph, from some hidden cause, and he appeared to be at peace with himself and the world in general.

He sat well in his saddle, though he was a person who was verging upon the Scriptural span of life, of three-score years and ten.

He was stoop-shouldered, with a hump almost amounting to a deformity, and upon his neck were clusters of curling, snow-white hair, while large gold-rimmed spectacles shaded his eyes.

His dress was elegant, that of a sport in spite of his years, and he sat his horse with the air of entire confidence of a man of nerve and perfect self-possession.

The one in ambush sat upon his horse, his lariat coiled and in hand ready to throw, one end being fast to his saddle-horn, for he wore a Mexican tree with military trappings.

He was in the fatigue uniform of the cavalry, and his shoulder-straps revealed the rank of a captain.

He was of fine physique and had a face fearless, handsome and winning.

The horse was as motionless as a statue, and the rider had a determined look upon his face as he saw his victim approaching his place of ambush.

Soon the advancing horseman, all unsuspecting danger, came within range of the lariat in the hands of the cavalry officer, and then it shot out from his hand with unerring precision.

There was a bound of the startled horse, a twang of the lariat as it came taut, a fall, a spring from his saddle by the officer, and he bent over the fallen man with a revolver at his head.

The scene that followed was a strange one.

There was an accusation from the officer that the man he had captured was in disguise, that he was none other than Silk Lasso Sam, the Outlaw of the Overland, playing a part with a false hump on his back, an assumed stoop in his shoulders, unneeded spectacles and a wig of snowy hair, for this had been torn from the head, in the fall, and the impostor was revealed.

Hardly had he secured his prisoner when there was heard the sound of approaching horses, and into sight dashed a party of cowboys.

They halted, and saluted at sight of the officer, gazing with surprise and curiosity at the scene.

"Men, you are on your way to the fort, so take this man as your prisoner, for he is none other than Silk Lasso Sam, the Outlaw Chief of the Overland."

"I suspected him, and dogged his steps, when he rode out of the fort with Miss Clarice Carr and Miss Nina De Suro this afternoon."

"He led them into a trap of his outlaws, and the ladies are now his captives, being hurried away to a retreat, while he, a guest of Colonel De Suro under false pretenses, is returning to claim ransom, alleging that he was set free by the outlaws to be able to get the money for payment to obtain his own and the ladies' freedom and safe return to the fort."

"Ask Colonel Dunwoody from me to send my troop after me, for I follow the trail of the outlaws and their captives, to mark it."

"Now take your prisoner, and see that if he escapes you, it will be alone through the grave. Shoot to kill if he attempts to get away."

The cowboys gave a cheer, the officer mounted his horse and dashed away, and the prisoner was left to the tender mercy of men who he knew longed for an excuse to shoot or hang him.

He had played a bold game in entering the fort in disguise, to capture those whom he sought to get big ransom for, and he had lost.

He had been searched by his captor, and some papers taken from him along with his weapons.

"Pards, I says this man, Silk Lasso Sam, has escaped death too often ter take any chances."

The speaker was Cowboy Charlie, the leader of the herders.

"So says I."

"Me, too."

"And me."

And thus the cries went through the camp.

"He has been a terror on ther trails for a long time, and he has kilt too many people jist to git gold."

"When he were a prisoner at the fort, under sentence of death, his sister come to the fort and she set him free."

"It was said he pledged her to lead a different life, and here he is, a few months after, all humped up with a false hump on his back, and wearing white hair, playin' an honest old man, when he is the worst criminal on the frontier."

"If we takes him to the fort he'll escape some way, dead sure."

"So I says let him escape through ther grave."

"What does yer say, cowboy pards?"

The yell that greeted the speech of the cowboy captain showed the feeling of the men, and one struck the popular thought when he cried:

"Hang him!"

"Yes, hang him now," came in a chorus of voices, and the Outlaw of the Overland at last knew that his fate was sealed.

CHAPTER II.

THE COWBOY'S RUSE.

"PARDS, I claim the right to send a bullet through his heart, to even up my claim of revenge against him."

"All right, Mustang Monte, fire one shot and that ends all," was Cowboy Charlie's response, and at his words the eyes of every cowboy were turned upon Mustang Monte.

The herders had carried out their determination to hang the outlaw, Silk Lasso Sam, and thus prevent another escape by him from the death all deemed he should suffer.

They had carried him into the timber and a large tree with a low limb that projected far out from the trunk, had been found.

Over this a lariat was thrown, and the noose was placed about the neck of the prisoner by Mustang Monte, who claimed the right of executioner, in that he said that his brother had fallen by the hand of the outlaw chief.

Then the doomed outlaw had been mounted upon his horse, his hands securely bound behind him, and at a signal from Cowboy Charlie the animal had been struck a sudden blow and bounding forward had left Silk Lasso Sam dangling in mid-air.

Not an appeal for mercy had been made by the outlaw, who had won the admiration of his executioners as he coolly gazed at the preparations for his death, and looked down into the grave dug for him without the slightest sign of emotion.

When the permission was granted to Mustang Monte, to send a bullet through the heart of the man swinging in mid-air, he drew his revolver, rode some distance off, and with a yell set his horse into a run.

As he went by, fifteen paces distant, he fired one shot, and a convulsive movement of the limbs followed.

No one looked to see whether the cowboy had hit or missed, for Mustang Monte never missed.

He was a man of really distinguished appearance, with the face of an Adonis, the form of a Hercules and graceful as a woman.

He dressed better than his comrades, and had the air of one born and bred in a different atmosphere than that of the border, and yet he was the superior of all his companions in throwing a lariat, riding, shooting and in skill as a borderman.

"Now, who plants him?"

"Here are the lots, pards," and Cowboy Charlie shook a number of poker chips in his hat.

The men stepped briskly up and each drew out a chip, and a smile crossed the faces as they realized that theirs was not the weird duty to bury a man who had been hanged.

"You are elected, Mustang Monte," said Cowboy Charlie as that herder drew last and there was only the fatal chip left for him to take.

"So be it, captain, I accept the duty," was the reply, and the cowboys then threw themselves into their saddles and rode away at a gallop, for the shadows of nightfall were near at hand.

Mustang Monte stood gazing after them until they were out of sight, and then he moved quickly to the rope that was bound about the trunk of the tree upon which the execution had taken place.

He lowered the body to the ground with a strange gentleness of mien for a man who handled the form of one against whom he sought revenge.

Then he stepped up to the body and loosened the noose about the throat.

"That run of mine to prevent this from drawing taut around his neck worked well," he muttered.

"Yes, the pressure was upon the back of the neck, and should not have choked him, at least to death, and in this time."

"It was difficult to do anything for him and not be seen by the others, and I feared that they would discover even that there was no bullet in my revolver when I fired that shot."

"He is insensible, if not dead, and the question is whether I can bring him back to life or not."

"I owe it to him that I should, for he saved my life once, and outlaw though he has been, I must repay the debt, if it lies within my power."

"He will keep the secret, I know, and I shall not be the one to tell."

"If I fetch him back to life again, then he must keep the pledge he made his sister and go far from here, yes, lead a different life."

"Should he not do so, then will I be the first one to hunt him down, for, having canceled my debt to him, as I now am striving to do, it will be my duty to end his career of crime should he begin upon it again."

"Yes, I can fill in the grave, and report that I buried him, and at last there will be an end to Silk Lasso Sam."

And all this while, as he mused aloud, Mustang Monte was rubbing the prostrate form and striving to start again the current of life surging through heart and brain.

CHAPTER III.

A SOLDIER'S LETTER.

In a grandly beautiful plantation home, in a Southern State, gazing upon the scenery of valley and river spread out before her, sat a young and beautiful woman, a few weeks after the capture of the outlaw chief Silk Lasso Sam, by the cavalry officer, and his being left to the charge of the Cowboy Rangers of Pioneer Post on the frontier.

The one who sat in the large bay window of her cozy sitting-room possessed beauty of face and form far above the average of her sex.

The face was as darkly bronzed as a sailor's, and in spite of its refinement, stamped upon every feature, there was a look of fearlessness and determination which revealed a spirit, nerve and indomitable will worthy a brave man.

Presently a servant entered and handed to her a number of papers, magazines, and letters, just brought from the village post-office several miles away.

She cast all but two letters aside, and these she balanced in her hand as undecided which one to read first.

They both bore far western post-marks, one being stamped at the military post of Pioneer Fort and the other from the mining-camp of Pocket City.

She appeared to recognize in each case the handwriting on the envelope, both being bold and legible.

The letter from Pioneer Post she first broke the seal of, and there was a crest upon it.

It was as follows:

"If it is my painful duty to be the one to give you sad tidings, my dear Miss Leigh, I can at least feel that there must be some consolation to you in the thought that at last you are free from the shadow that has rested upon you for years, the burden which your devoted sister's love has forced you to bear so well and so long."

"You can but surmise from what I have said, that your brother, Arden Leigh, so long the terror of the Overland Trails as Silk Lasso Sam the Outlaw, is dead."

"The pledge which he gave to you, of leading a new life, when you rescued him from this fort though under sentence of death upon the gallows, he broke, as he did every other promise that he made to you."

"When you, trusting him, had gone from these wilds, where you had come to save him alone, he at once began again to plot mischief, and this last escapade of his was boldest of all his many daring deeds."

"He was determined, it seemed, to kidnap Miss Clarice Carr, the beautiful heiress whom you met here, and who treated you as she would a sister."

"He came to the fort disguised as a former partner of Miss De Suro's father, and thus as the honored guest of Colonel De Suro and his wife."

"Disguised with a false hump upon his back, a stoop in his gait, gold spectacles, a face bronzed darkly and a wig of white hair, while he dressed like an aged dandy, he deceived every one, and was hospitably received by all."

"Thus, while Buffalo Bill and his scouts, aided by Surgeon Frank Powell, were hunting for Silk Lasso Sam the Overland outlaw, your brother, in his disguise, was plotting in the fort to kidnap Miss Carr and Miss De Suro."

"And in his plot he was successful, having himself captured with the ladies, whom he escorted for a ride on horseback, to a spot where he had his men lying in wait."

"My gallant captain of cavalry, Dashing Dick Caruth, as he is called, was suspicious of the supposed aged sport, and discovered the plot, captured the plotter, and turning him over to a band of cowboys, while he sent by them for his troop and followed the kidnappers to mark their trail and thus be enabled to rescue the two young ladies."

"Then came the fatal ending of this plot of your unfortunate brother, for I am told that, in attempting to escape from the cowboys, one of them, Mustang Monte, was compelled to kill him."

"The bullet pierced his heart, and he was buried where he fell, while the cowboy captain came on and made his report to me."

"I rode myself to the grave, for your sake, and had it marked, and should you desire the body removed I will gladly attend to all arrangements for you, though perhaps it would be best to let him rest here where he has fallen."

"Such, at last, is the end of your brother, my dear Miss Leigh, and in your sorrow you have my deepest sympathy, for I know how dearly you loved him, in spite of his evil career; but I cannot bring myself to feel that it is a misfortune to you, no, rather a blessing."

"I hasten to write you of the affair, and to tell

you that Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Powell and Captain Caruth were those who were instrumental in the rescue of the two kidnapped ladies from the retreat of the outlaws, and they found there a prisoner, slowly starving to death, one who is dear to you, and against whom your brother sought revenge.

"I refer to Carrol Dean, the miner, who long ago was your brother's rival in love.

"Now, my dear Miss Leigh, permit me to say that ere very long I hope to see you, for I am coming East on leave, and coming for the sole purpose of seeing you, of telling you that which I cannot write to you.

"With every good wish for your future life, that the dark clouds of the past may drift away from you, believe me,

"Most sincerely your friend,

"OSCAR DUNWOODY,

"Colonel U. S. Army, Com'd'g Pioneer Post."

CHAPTER IV.

THE MINER'S LETTER.

THE tears dimmed the eyes of the beautiful girl as she read this letter from the commander of Pioneer Post, who had not only forgiven her for her clever rescue of her outlaw brother from his keeping, but fallen desperately in love with her as well.

The tears were called up by the news of her brother's end, one whom she had loved with all his faults, one whom she had befriended, protected and saved in all cases when she could do so, going to dwell among the miners of Pocket City, becoming the landlady of a border tavern, and the keeper of a gambling-den, in the plot she had formed, the game she was playing, to save her brother from his life of crime.

"Peace to his ashes.

"Poor Arden, my brother!

"At last you have gone from me, at last the end has come to you, and which I knew must some day be.

"But better so than upon the gallows, ah, yes, far better thus for you to die, by the shot of a cowboy."

She buried her face in her hands, and for a long time so remained.

When at last she raised her head her eyes fell upon a large painting that hung upon the wall.

The figures were life-size, and it was a weird, strange painting, telling a story full of sorrow and romance.

It was a painting of an artist's studio, and at a table sat the artist himself, with white, haggard face, a look of despair resting upon it, and the right hand grasping a dice-box, the dice being upon the table.

Opposite to the artist sat the skeleton form of Death, a malignant grin upon his bony face as he pointed his finger at the dice he had thrown, and which were higher than those of the artist.

Behind the artist in the background was the shadowy form of a beautiful maiden, beckoning him away from his game of "The Last Chance" with death.

The face of this beautiful woman was the counterpart of that of Ruth Leigh, whose eyes now rested upon it.

"How strange," mused the maiden.

"With Colonel Dunwoody's letter clasped in my hand, that I should now look up involuntarily and behold my brother's face in that painting.

"He told me how he had bought an ideal portrait years ago, and had never found the real until he saw me.

"I told him the story of that weird painting, of how the artist, refused by my mother, had gone down hill in his career until he at last painted the Last Chance, and was found dead in his studio with his brush still in his hand.

"And now Colonel Dunwoody, who fell in love with the artist's portrait of my mother and bought it, now says to me in this letter that he is coming to tell me what he cannot write.

"And what answer shall I give that noble man, who trusting wholly in me, though he knew me as Bonnie Belle of Pocket City in the mining country of Yellow Dust Valley, is coming to tell me of his love?

"I can give him but one answer, and that he shall have, for I love him with all my heart and soul."

For some moments her eyes rested upon the weird painting of the despairing artist, and then, with a sigh, she said:

"Now to see what Carrol Dean says."

She broke the seal and read as follows:

"Sitting here to-night, my dear Ruth, in my lonely cabin, pining these lines to you, my thoughts go backward to the old time when I dwelt with my mother in our ruined plantation home, and you, your father and mother lived in your grand old mansion of Valley View.

"You were a wee girl then, beautiful as a fairy, and your brother a handsome, dashing fellow, who alas, had already brought a cloud upon his life by his wild career.

"We, your brother and I, both loved the same maiden, pretty Kathleen Clyde, and when she chose between us, Arden Leigh shot me down before her eyes.

"Believing that he had killed me, he fled and became a wanderer, and went down life's scale of crime until now the end has come to him, and he fills a dishonored grave here on the frontier.

"You did far more than your duty to save him, for, after your father's death you almost unsexed yourself in becoming Bonnie Belle the idol of Yellow Dust Valley, to rescue him from his life of crime.

low Dust Valley, to rescue him from his life of crime.

"When you and I so strangely met there, you seeking to save your brother, and I to dig a fortune out of the mines, I told you that Arden Leigh could never be redeemed, and appealed to you to give up the hopeless task.

"You struggled on, and rescuing him, giving him a small fortune in money, you sent him, as you believed, far away.

"Instead, he it was who, as a masked outlaw, robbed you on your way home out of Pocket City, and again taking to the trails, he came to my cabin, caught me at a disadvantage, made me a prisoner, and took me to his retreat to starve me to death for the old revenge he felt against me.

"Through Captain Caruth, Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill, I was rescued from death, he was made a prisoner, and in attempting to escape was killed, and now I write you, as I sit here in my cabin, to tell you that fortune is smiling upon me, I have struck it rich, and soon hope to be with my loved ones again, and prove myself a brother to you."

There was more to the letter, but when she had read thus far Ruth Leigh said:

"Dear, noble Deadshot Dean, as they called him in the mines, with such a brother I can be happy, especially as I will have such a lover as Oscar Dunwoody can be.

"Yes, at last there is happiness ahead for me, I believe."

CHAPTER V.

A SINLESS CRIME.

WITH the exception of Colonel Dunwoody, the Commandant of Pioneer Post, Dick Caruth, the dashing cavalry captain, was the most popular man at Pioneer Post.

He was rich, handsome, a perfect soldier and knew no fear.

All the men liked him, his troopers made him their idol, and women were fascinated by him.

Yet Dashing Dick the Dragoon was a bachelor.

He had never married, and no pretty girl had ever been able to discover the reason why.

Colonel Dunwoody was also a single man, and known as the "Handsome Bachelor Colonel."

He also was a man of wealth, and yet had eluded every effort of fair ones with designs upon him to "rope him in," so to speak.

With the large number of soldiers at the fort, there was necessarily many officers, and most of them had their families with them.

Among those ladies who were the acknowledged belles was Nina De Sutro, the ward of Colonel De Sutro, and a fair young heiress and beauty, who was a Mexican.

Then came Clarice Carr, a regal beauty, rich, accomplished, and yet loving more to dwell upon the frontier with a kinswoman, the wife of Major Lionel Lester, of the post, and the third officer in command, to reigning as a belle in metropolitan society.

But then there were those who asserted that Clarice Carr was a woman with a history, and that might have been the cause of her living the life of seclusion she did upon the far frontier.

The surgeon of the fort, Dr. Frank Powell, more generally known as the Surgeon Scout, Buffalo Bill the chief of scouts, and others more or less famous and popular were dwellers at Pioneer Post, and will figure in this romance of army life in the Wild West, where romance and reality, daring adventure, love and death play such prominent parts in the every-day life upon the border.

But let me return to two of those already named, Nina De Sutro and Captain Dick Caruth.

The latter had become more than ever a hero since his capture of Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw, and yet there was that in his fine face which showed that he carried a cloud upon him.

Days after the reported death, at the hands of Mustang Monte, of the outlaw chief, Captain Caruth had called at the quarters of Surgeon Frank Powell and said:

"Doctor, I have to ask a favor of you.

"I have the most painful, disagreeable duty of my life to perform, and I desire that you be a witness of it."

"If you wish it so, yes, Dick."

"I do, so come with me."

The captain led the way to the quarters of Colonel De Sutro, and he asked to see Miss Nina De Sutro.

She soon swept into the parlor, her dark, Mexican eyes as brilliant as flames, and extended a hand to each officer.

"Are you alone, Miss De Sutro?"

"Yes, Captain Caruth, for Mrs. De Sutro and the colonel are away for a ride."

"Pray let me ask you to send the servant away on some errand, for what I have to say to you, Surgeon Powell alone must hear."

The beautiful girl arose with a look of surprise, left the room for a few minutes and returning said:

"We are all alone now, sir."

"Then I shall lose no time, Miss De Sutro, in making known why I am here, and seemingly mysterious, and permit me to say now that what I know, and Surgeon Powell is to hear shall go no further."

"I thank you, sir.

"Pray explain," and the red lips were pale now, and quivering.

"You are aware that I captured Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw, soon after his daring kidnapping of Miss Clarice Carr and yourself?"

The maiden bowed.

"I captured him alone, and searching him found certain papers which I have in my possession.

"One of them was a written confession from him to place in the hands of Colonel Dunwoody, in case he was not aided by you in his plans."

"Captain Caruth!"

"Pardon me, and hear me through, please.

"We have all heard of how, when you were a school-girl, on your way to the convent in Mexico under the care of a nun, your lives were rescued, when you were caught in a freshet in crossing the Rio Grande.

"The rescuer was unknown to you, and an American; but he became a hero in your eyes.

"That you had met him again we did not know: but that you did meet at a tournament, where as an unknown, he defeated all whom he faced in trials of strength, skill and prowess, this paper states.

"Girl that you were you became infatuated with the man who had saved your life, and ran off from the convent with him and married him.

"He knew that you were the heiress to a very large fortune, and he was designing.

"But discovering that you could not claim your inheritance until you were twenty-one, and you were then not sixteen, he deserted you, and you in your despair returned to the convent.

"You met him here, when he appeared in disguise, as Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw.

"Your secret marriage no one knew of, and all believed you a young lady, Miss De Sutro.

"But he, whom you feared and hated, forced you to aid him in his scheme to kidnap Miss Carr.

"Your crime was a sinless one upon your part, Mrs. Arden Leigh, yet, with all the facts I have in my possession, I must beg of you to leave this fort at your very earliest convenience, for there are men here who love you, little dreaming of the secret locked up in your heart, and that you plotted against Miss Carr, your friend, from fear.

"Will you do as I ask, Mrs. Leigh?"

"Yes, I will go, only keep my secret, and I thank you for the mercy you show me in keeping my secret," was the almost broken-hearted rejoinder of the unhappy woman.

CHAPTER VI.

A STRANGE LOVE TALE.

CAPTAIN DICK CARUTH went from the home of Nina De Sutro along with Surgeon Powell to whom he said:

"Well, Frank, you heard all?"

"Yes, and she is a wonderful woman."

"She is indeed; but could I have done otherwise?"

"No, for though she was forced, to protect herself, to obey the bidding of her outlaw husband, yet she surely did enter into the plot against Miss Carr."

"Yes, and I am going to see Miss Carr now."

"Does she know all?"

"No, but I am going to tell her that Miss De Sutro is in trouble and to go to her."

"She is a noble woman, Dick, and did she know all she would go."

"Yes, she would go to her, for she is a noble woman, one whom I wish I was free to ask to become my wife."

"Why, Dick, are you not free to do so?" asked Surgeon Powell with surprise.

"I am not."

Frank Powell made no reply.

It was the accepted belief in the fort that Dick Caruth was a free man.

Many believed that he loved Clarice Carr, and she certainly had seemed to admire the handsome captain.

Now he told the Surgeon Scout that he was not a free man.

As they reached the quarters of the surgeon Captain Caruth said:

"Frank, I will explain my words to you, though to no one else have I ever made known the secret.

"I am not a free man."

"Surely you are not engaged to one woman, yet love another."

"Worse than that, Frank."

"Worse?"

"Yes, I am married."

"Dick Caruth, do you tell me the truth?"

"I do."

"I have nothing more to say, other than if there is blame in the matter for this unfortunate position of affairs, it does not rest upon you."

"Nor upon her," quickly said the captain.

"Who?"

"My wife."

"Ah! neither to blame?"

"No, for we were no more than children then and two old fools made us wed, thus casting a cloud over our lives forever."

"Where is she?"

"I do not know, for I have never seen her since the ceremony was performed, and I do not

know how to find her, for she does not bear my name now, nor her own, I am sure."

"What a remarkable state of affairs, Richard Caruth."

"Yes, it would make a good romance for a novel, would it not?" said the captain, bitterly.

"A diabolical one, yes, for it would be full of misery for the innocent actors, while the two sinners who brought about the unfortunate situation could not escape free of sorrow and trouble."

"They met their punishment, however, for both old men died poor."

"One was my grandfather, the other the grandfather of my little girl wife, and their daughters, our mothers, having married against their wishes, they made us marry to please them, when I was a young cadet at West Point, and she was a mere child, just in her teens, brought from boarding-school to be thus united to me, and parted immediately after the ceremony."

"What became of her Heaven only knows, and thus you see the position I am in."

"I do, Captain Caruth, and you have my deepest sympathy, for I have felt all along that you were in love with Miss Carr, and, as I am a close student of human nature, I felt certain that the lady loves you."

"I would like to think so, and yet why dare I say this, for we can be as nothing to each other."

"Perhaps you may some day find your missing bride."

"It may be, and yet I doubt it, fear it."

"You dread doing so?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Well, I have often had a dread of that meeting."

"Is she not lovable?"

"She was an exquisitely beautiful child, a perfect little fairy."

"What else?"

"She seemed awed by her position, yet submitted to the cruel punishment put upon her with a calm and gracious dignity that was very winning."

"She understood that she was forced to marry you then?"

"Oh yes, she had been told that I was to be her husband, that her mother and mine had married against the will of their parents, and that there was to be no slip in our case."

"They were old soldiers and they held to life and their views with a tenacity and discipline which could not but make two young people yield, and the result was the misery of uniting two children together without one atom of congeniality, and it may have been a still greater crime, for, fretting under the galling chains, and loving another, she may have slightly regarded her childhood bonds, kept her secret and been wedded to another when wooed and won."

"It is a very sad case, Dick, but I have hopes for the future for you, and happiness to come to you some day," and the Surgeon Scout held forth his hand, which Captain Caruth grasped in silence and then hastened away.

CHAPTER VII.

AN UNSHAKEN RESOLVE.

CLARICE CARR was seated in her own pleasant room, in Major Lionel Lester's quarters, for there she made her home, when she saw Captain Caruth coming.

The major and his wife were away, the servant was out and so she met the soldier herself at the door.

"Miss Carr, I have come to tell you a secret, and it is of a woman," he said.

"Then don't tell it, for no man should betray a woman's confidence, however slight the trust in him," she quickly rejoined.

"But do not misunderstand me, for I would not betray a confidence, only in this case I need your aid."

"It is of Miss De Sutro I would speak, and I can only say that she is to leave the fort."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and why she does not make known to any one, not even to colonel and Mrs. De Sutro, and therefore she is in a measure alone in her unhappiness and I have come to ask you to go to her and comfort her."

"Tell her that I asked it, though that I gave you no reason for the request other than that I knew that she was unhappy and I felt that you were the one to best offer her consolation."

"I will go at once, Captain Caruth," was the ready answer of Clarice Carr, and the captain escorted her as far as the door of Lieutenant-Colonel De Sutro's quarters.

Clarice Carr found Nina alone, and pacing the floor of the parlor.

She started at sight of her visitor and tried to hide the traces of weeping upon her face.

But Clarice went up to her and said in her sweet, sympathetic way:

"Captain Caruth told me that you had some sorrow come upon you, what he did not say, if he knew, and that you were to leave the fort, so begged me to come and comfort you."

"He sent you to me, Clarice Carr?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"That I might give you my sympathy, my aid, if I can do so."

"Captain Caruth is a noble-hearted man, I believe, and having struck deep, he would heal the wound as best he can, which he has made, by sending you to me."

"Nay, I do not believe that he meant to wound you, only he felt that you needed the sympathy of one of your sex in some sorrow that has befallen you, and so asked me to come."

After a moment of silence Nina De Sutro said reflectively:

"Yes, I suppose that is what he did it for, and I am glad you have come, as you are about the only one I would make a confidante of, and you I will take wholly into my confidence."

"I will tell you my secret, Clarice Carr, and just why I am leaving the fort at the command of Captain Caruth."

"At his command?" and Clarice looked both pained and surprised.

"Yes, I will tell you all."

And then did Nina De Sutro tell the whole story of her unhappy life, her secret marriage to an outlaw, who had forced her to aid him in his plots to kidnap her for ransom.

"I intended to restore to you that ransom money, Clarice, as the only recompense I could make you," she added when her story was told.

The whole unhappy tale from beginning to end was made known, and Clarice listened to it all, and clasped the hand of Nina in token of sympathy.

"And now, Clarice, I have but one life before me, and that is to go to the convent in Mexico where I was educated, and there take the veil, giving up the world forever and giving my life and my fortune to good in the new existence I am to take upon myself."

"No, no, there is no reason for you to do this, Nina, not in the least, for I cannot feel that your act was other than that of a child."

"You were but a girl, scarcely sixteen, and it was but natural that you should admire the handsome stranger who saved your life, and that of the nun in whose charge you were."

"The very fact that he remained unknown to you, did not force his attentions upon you, was that much in his favor of winning you, for he made you think of him and long to meet him again."

"When you did meet him again, you saw him again a hero, a victor over all his adversaries at the tournament, and it was not to be wondered at that you felt that he was your beau ideal and that he won your little heart at a glance."

"I grant his being a man of fascinating address, of fine physique, handsome and a heart-breaker, when one did not know him as the black-hearted outlaw he is, and I can understand well how he could force you to obey him, for fear of exposing to the world that you were the wife of Silk Lasso Sam, a man whom you had learned to hate more decidedly than you had loved him."

"No, no, keep your secret and live for happiness in the future, for you deserve it after all you have known of sorrow."

"You are indeed a comforter and a friend, Clarice; but my mind is made up, and to the convent I go, for did I live in the world and love another man, it would break my heart to tell him that I was a married woman, the widow of Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw."

"No, I shall take the veil," and Clarice saw that she was determined in this resolve.

CHAPTER VIII.

HER SECRET.

CAPTAIN DICK CARUTH was at the officers' club at the fort, when he received the following note:

"I did as you requested.
Please come to see me, for I have something of importance to tell you.
C. C."

The captain at once obeyed this request, and soon found himself alone with Clarice Carr.

Her face was very pale now, and her lips quivered, as though she was deeply moved.

"I hope, Miss Carr, I have not asked too much of you, in what I did," he said, observing her manners.

"Oh, no, I am glad that I went, and I had a long talk with Miss De Sutro, as I must still call her, for I know her sad story, she having told me all."

"I am glad that she told you all," he said, in a low tone.

"Yes, and though there are things to condemn in her life, there is much to pity, to win sympathy and to admire."

"I agree with you."

"She is a brave woman."

"Yes, one who under other circumstances would have led a life only to carry out noble purposes."

"But her girlhood was wrecked, through no fault of hers, but from her love of an unworthy object, and that a woman is hardly responsible for, as these hearts of ours are strange things, Captain Caruth."

"They are indeed," said the officer, with sudden earnestness.

"Shall I tell you how strange is my heart, and I am a man?"

"Shall I be led into telling you that which I have no right to tell, which you should not hear from my lips, and yet which I feel that I must tell, and then let you pardon, yet not condemn me?"

He spoke with a sudden earnestness now, which fairly startled her.

She gazed at him with almost awe, yet there was admiration in her glance, too, as he stood before her in all the majesty of his splendid manhood, his love which he could not control.

She made no reply, though she had heard his words that he would tell her that which she had no right to hear from his lips.

He drew close to her side and said:

"Do not shrink from me."

"I did not."

"I do not intend to touch you with impious hand, but I do say to you that I love you with all the strength of my strong nature."

"I can no more help loving you than I can help telling you of it, and yet I have not the right to do so, as you shall understand."

"Let me tell you a story, Miss Carr, one that has clouded my life, left its brand upon my heart, and, now that I know and love you, made all there is of bitterness to rankle in my breast."

"It is a story you should know, and yet it may drive me from you, send me away from the friendship I so dearly prize, the sunshine of your regard, for you have been kind to me, Miss Carr."

She looked at him in a wondering kind of way, yet did not say she would not hear that which he should not tell her.

Thus encouraged, he told her the story which he had made known to the Surgeon Scout, adding:

"My father was a sailor, and my mother's father bitterly opposed her marrying him."

"But she knew him only as a good man, one whom she loved, and they were wedded."

"It was supposed that my father was lost at sea, and mother, when she died, left me to the care of my grandfather, who made me his heir, and made a soldier out of me."

"I have told you how he forced me into a marriage, mere boy that I was, with a little girl whom I have never seen or heard of since."

"My grandfather lost his money, so I would have been poor had not my father, upon the day of my graduation with first honors, turned up, looking poor and destitute."

"I received him with joy, and then he told me he had played the tramp to test me."

"He had been wrecked upon a foreign coast, and only after long years had escaped from captivity among savages, and had made a fortune."

"That fortune he left to me."

"And the girl-wife?" asked Clarice.

"Her grandfather died leaving her poor, I heard, and she disappeared mysteriously, for I could never find her."

"Shall I tell you of her?"

"You?"

"Yes, for I happen to know that her mother believed her husband had deserted her."

"Indeed, while in a Western State, he had been led into a position by a friend where he was suspected of murder and robbery, tried under an assumed name and sent to prison for life."

"That false friend when dying told all to his father, a man of wealth and influence, who at once got the unfortunate prisoner a pardon, and his daughter visited him in prison and heard all."

"It was the wealthy gentleman who took her to the prison, and to atone for the crime of his son, he made her his heir."

"Her father died, also her guardian, whose name she had taken, and thus you could not find her."

"But she knew you, and now that you have said what you did, she can say that she learned to love the boy cadet she wedded in the long ago, and—"

But she said no more, for Dick Caruth saw all now, and in an instant his strong arms were about her, and she was drawn close to his heart.

CHAPTER IX.

THE BORDER TRAMP.

ALONG a trail seldom trod by the foot of man a strange specimen of humanity was plodding his way.

He was a man of large size, yet his face was thin and haggard, his steps slow, as though from illness.

His dress, if the rags that clothed him might so be called, was a cross between Indian and cowboy costume with the attire of a miner.

Long, unkempt hair, beard of some weeks' growth, worn boots and a tattered hat completed his make-up excepting a belt of arms.

"I am too weak to go further to-night, so will find a camping-place and go on to-morrow, for then I can reach the cavern, and surely I will not find all gone."

"No, they can hardly have found it lynx-eyed though they be."

"What a wretched looking specimen am I now of the *genus homo*."

"Who would recognize me now?"

"Not a soul I am certain."

"Yes, I am homeless, friendless, wretched, just recovering from a long illness and without a dollar to call my own."

"I am a Border Tramp, and I verily believe were my worst enemy to see me now he would take pity upon me and give me money."

The man now found a camping-place, spread his tattered blankets upon the ground and got his supper out of his haversack.

There was a bird which he had killed, some crackers and coffee which he made in a tin cup, after building a small fire.

The place he had sought for a camp was such a spot as a wild beast might have looked for among the rocks, to hide away from hunters.

He ate his supper in silence, and then smoked a pipe very complacently, taking the stem from his mouth every now and then to muse aloud.

To a close observer he would have been discovered to be no ordinary personage, in spite of his hard looks.

There was the stamp of intellect upon his brow, a fire in his eyes and a look resting upon his lips that showed he was one to do and dare almost anything.

"I must begin life anew."

"I must start from the very beginning, to carve out my future."

"It will be a bitter blow to me if I do not find a foundation in the cavern, a rock upon which to build my hopes; but I shall not despair if I find nothing there."

"I have not lived thus long, passed through all that I have, escaped death a hundred times, to now lie down and die upon the side of a trail because I am afoot in a wilderness, friendless and wretched."

"Ah, no, I can make my life what I will, and my will is to possess gold."

"Now to rest, for I have a hard mountain tramp of it to-morrow."

So saying he laid down upon his hard bed, drew his ragged blankets about him and almost instantly sunk to sleep.

For sleep to come to him so quickly proved that he was either a very hardened wretch, with no conscience, or he was a man whose life had not been an evil one.

A wolf howled near him in the night, and others came near, yet, though they awakened him they did not disturb his rest.

He appeared to feel no dread of them whatever.

The morning came and he started upon his way, halting at the first brook to plunge in and have a bath, after which he ate his breakfast, which was as frugal as his supper had been.

At noon he again halted and took a short nap after dinner, for he seemed to know how to aid nature all in his power.

Toward evening he came into a wild mass of rocky hills, and struck a well-traveled trail.

"It is the stage trail from Pocket City," he muttered, and he walked rapidly along it now, as though confident that he might meet some one on a track so well-traveled, and this he sought to avoid.

A short distance along the trail brought him to where half a dozen canyons branched off, and up one of these he turned, as though familiar with the locality.

He approached the face of a cliff, overgrown with stunted bushes, with great caution, and soon reached a spot where the foliage grew very dense.

Into this he went and entered a cavern there visible.

Taking a match and candle from his pocket he soon had a light and a great abyss was revealed in the cavern, spanned by a bridge of logs, which could be raised and lowered into position by pulleys.

Crossing this with extreme caution he went on along the cavern until he came out into an open glen, or basin, overhung with high cliffs.

There was a large spring there, the water running into the cavern, good meadow land and a number of trees.

"The place is deserted, and yet its existence must be known to other than the band."

"I wish that I knew."

"Well, now to make my home here until I can look about me."

"But first to see if my treasures are still safe."

With this he went to where a tree grew close to a cliff.

Up the tree he climbed, but not without difficulty, as he seemed weak, and reaching a limb that branched out along the rocks he walked upon it to where he could step off upon a rocky shelf.

He did so, though it was a dangerous act to perform, calling for a cool head and steady nerve.

He clung close to the wall, and there was barely space to do so, making his way slowly around the cliff by the projections, until he reached a stunted tree growing out of a crevice.

Behind this tree was concealed an open space some two feet wide by five in height.

Into this he went and suddenly a cry of de-

light broke from his lips and he called out, as though addressing some one, rather than speaking to himself:

"The treasure is here!"

"Yes, the money, clothes, saddle, bridle, lariat, provisions and all."

"No one has found this hiding-place, and the foundation rock of my fortune is laid."

"I am another man from this very moment, and men shall hear of me again."

"Ha! ha! ha! I almost feel like a miner who has struck it rich, and has gotten the gold fever."

CHAPTER X.

A MASKED FOE.

IN his lonely cabin a couple of miles from Pocket City mining-camp, in the Yellow Dust Valley, sat a man writing a letter.

It was a beautiful Sabbath afternoon, and the miner was dressed up in his best clothes, as was his wont on a Sunday, and was devoting his time to writing letters to the dear ones in their far-away home.

He was a man of fine presence, noble face, and his look indicated refinement of manner and intelligence.

He wrote in an easy way, and had already covered a number of pages.

The man was Miner Carrol Dean, known in the mines as Deadshot Dean, and the one who had written the letter to Ruth Leigh, telling her of the death of her outlaw brother, Silk Lasso Sam.

Months had passed since that letter had been written, and now the miner was writing home that his claim continued to pan out generously, and ere long he hoped to be at home, a rich man, never again to leave those so dear to him.

He was seated by the window of his cabin, where a table, lowered and raised by hinges, formed his desk.

His view from the window was a beautiful one, and, though long accustomed to it, he often paused in his writing to glance out upon the scenery.

So engrossed was he in what he was doing that he failed to see a shadow darken the doorway behind him.

A form had entered, and a man stood gazing at him, his revolver held covering him.

This man was of tall form, clad in buckskin from his moccasins to his cap with a wolf's tail in it.

But strangest of all he was masked.

The mask he wore was of buckskin also, and completely hid his face and neck, leaving holes only for the eyes.

This singular mask was hideously painted to resemble a death's-head, being black with a skull of white, grinning teeth and all, the eyes glaring through the sockets.

The miner, all unconscious of a stranger near, went on with his letter writing, for the moccasined feet of the man did not make a sound.

Suddenly the stranger's voice broke the silence with:

"Hands up, Deadshot Dean, for you are my game!"

The miner started slightly, in spite of his iron nerve.

His belt of arms lay upon his bed ten feet away, and he was surely caught.

But the face was calm, the manner free from excitement as he turned calmly toward the one who had uttered such threatening words to him.

He again slightly started as his eyes rested upon the buckskin-clad form and the masked face.

"Did you hear?"

"Hands up, I say, Deadshot Dean!"

"I am unarmed, for there lie my weapons upon my bed," calmly said the miner.

The visitor quickly stepped between the miner and his weapons.

"Now I hold you at an advantage and it is well, for you are a dangerous man."

"You appear to know me?"

"I do."

"Then you have the advantage in that respect, as I do not recognize you."

"I shall keep my advantage in that respect, for I am not anxious to be known even to a man upon the eve of death."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that I have come here to seek revenge."

"Upon whom?"

"You."

"For what reason?"

"Wrongs done me by you."

"I have done you no wrong."

"You do not know me."

"Very true."

"Did you know me you would admit your wrong."

"I have wronged no man intentionally."

"So you say."

"So I mean."

"Well, I consider that you have done me grievous wrong, and I have come here to seek revenge."

"Who are you?"

"That you shall know in good time."

"I shall be glad to, and if I have wronged you, and can make any reparation, I shall be glad to do so."

"There is but one way in which you can right the wrong done me."

"How is that?"

"With your life."

"Then you expect to murder me, as you have the power just now to do?"

"No, for I am a believer in destiny."

"In what respect?"

"Well, I believe that it is your destiny to fall by my hand, mine to kill you, no matter what the odds against me may be."

"Fate has so willed it, and I am a blind follower of Fate."

"Well, what have you to propose, for I dwell here alone, and only my friends, or those who need succor, are invited to my cabin."

"I am an uninvited and an unwelcome guest, then?"

"Coming as you do, yes, so make known your wishes, please."

"Well, Deadshot Dean, my proposition is that you shall fight me a duel to the death," was the startling declaration that came from the lips of the stranger with the death-face mask.

CHAPTER XI.

A STRANGE DUEL.

THE proposition of the masked foe was a startling one to Deadshot Dean the miner.

He was one who knew no fear, yet also was a person who never sought trouble, avoided it whenever he could do so, even to a sacrifice of his dignity, and wished to live at peace with the world.

He had had enemies, and his name had been given him from the record he made as a dead-shot when his enemies pressed him beyond all bounds.

This man was beyond doubt some enemy who sought revenge, yet was he willing to really do as he said, fight him fairly to gain his revenge?

He did not believe that he was, though the proposition seemed to be made in good faith.

There was nothing to do, however, but accept the situation as it was presented to him, and so the miner said:

"Very well, if you are in earnest and intend to act squarely I will meet you."

"I have you in my power and could act as I pleased," was the reply.

"Very true, but I cannot believe you a murderer in cold blood, though of course I do not know who you are."

"Of course not."

"If I have wronged you I am willing to atone for it, if I can do so and thus save bloodshed."

"It cannot be done."

"Yet my life, or yours, would do no good."

You are mistaken, for I would rejoice in your death."

"Very well, if such is your desire I can but meet you."

"That is all that can be done."

"I am ready, if you will allow me to finish this letter, and then write a few lines more, which, if I fall, I wish you to mail for me."

"All right, but do not delay, for I do not care to be seen here."

The miner closed his letter with a few lines, writing as steadily as he had done before the coming of his masked visitor, and then wrote a short note, giving the situation, and stating that if he fell the letter would be mailed by his slaver.

Then he arose and said calmly:

"Very well; now I am at your service, and we can arrange to fight as you desire."

"You are certainly cool about it."

"Why be otherwise?"

"Few men face death with indifference, or such calmness as yours."

"My dear sir, I live, ready to meet death at any time. It would do no good to whine at a fate that comes to us all in time."

"Will you permit me to get my weapons?"

"Oh, no, for I would not trust you with them."

"I am no murderer, if you are."

"Still I would feel safer if the weapons were not in your grasp."

"Well, state your wishes."

"To go out of the cabin with me and stand back to back."

"I will place our revolvers just five paces off, and you are to step away when I do, count with me the five paces, stoop, seize your revolver wheel and open fire."

"That looks square enough for both of us."

"It certainly is, and I take my chances, when I have you at my mercy now, trusting wholly in destiny as I do."

"I am ready."

"My weapons are loaded, and to convince you that I mean well, I will let you have this one which I have had you covered with."

"All right."

"Now walk out of the cabin ahead of me."

The miner obeyed.

"Turn to the right and march twenty paces."

This the miner also did.

"See, I place your revolver here, and count back from it ten paces, and put mine down."

"Now come and stand back to back with me."

The miner came and took the position, and his masked foe asked:

"Now, should you be killed have you any wishes you desire me to carry out?"

"Yes."

"Name them."

"Seek to acquaint Scott King, the Vigilante judge at Pocket City, with my death, and have him send word at once to Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill at Pioneer Post. In their hands I leave everything."

"I will do as you request."

"And can I do anything for you, in case I should kill you, which, as it is a case of my life or yours, I shall do if I can?"

"You are very kind and thoughtful, and I will trouble you to search my body, if I fall, and carry out instructions you may find among the papers I carry."

"I will do so, sir."

"Are you ready now?"

"I am."

Then the masked foe turned his back to the miner and called out:

"Forward, march!"

"One! two! three! four!—Fire!"

Both men stepped off at the word *march*, and reaching the revolvers at the fifth step, stooped quickly, wheeled and fired together. Deadshot Dean, the miner, falling forward upon his face, while his masked foe said with a cruel laugh:

"Fool! did he think that I would face him with a bullet in the weapon I gave him to fight me with?"

CHAPTER XII.

THE KINGS OF THE BORDER.

Two horsemen were riding slowly along the trail leading from Pioneer Post to Pocket City, and they were within a dozen miles of the latter place about the time that Deadshot Dean fought the duel with his masked foe.

They were both men of world-wide fame, one being known as Buffalo Bill, the other as the Surgeon Scout, for though an officer in the army, Frank Powell had made a record as a scout and Indian-fighter.

In truth, the two men were called along the frontier the Kings of the Border, and well did they deserve the name, having won it upon many a hard fought field, in many a desperate single-hand combat, and by deeds most daring.

Both men were firm comrades, and had been for long years, for each owed his life to the other many times over.

They were handsome men, and their forms and faces would have won admiration in any gathering.

Tall, upright, carrying themselves with military air, wearing long hair falling upon their shoulders, Buffalo Bill with mustache and imperial, Frank Powell with mustache alone, the former in buckskin suit, top-boots and sombrero, the latter in cavalry boots, fatigue uniform, and black sombrero with sable plume, well mounted, thoroughly armed, they were indeed Kings of the Border.

Always ready with salute and title for Surgeon Powell before others, Buffalo Bill addressed him as "Pard" and "Frank," or "Doc," when together on a trail.

The scouts of the post, who were known as Buffalo Bill's Merry Men, all loved the surgeon as they did their chief, and were ever glad to have him along with them in scenes of danger, for they knew well what his great skill, deadly aim and indomitable pluck were worth in scenes that tried men's souls.

The two friends were now going to the vicinity of the mining-camp of Pocket City, upon a special mission.

There had been rumors of late that the coach driven by Four-in-hand Frank had been held up on the trail out of Pocket City, and the passengers robbed of a considerable sum.

The scout wished to find out if such was the case, and to set Deadshot Dean on the watch as a border detective, to hunt down the robber or robbers, and Surgeon Powell was going to see the miner on a friendly visit, merely.

As they rode along together they were discussing the noble traits of the miner, and the scenes in and about Yellow Dust Valley, in which they had been deeply interested participants.

"I tell you, Bill, that truth is stranger than fiction I realize more and more every day I live."

"Now here the miner, Carrol Dean, was shot down by his rival, Arden Leigh, and his would-be destroyer drifted about a fugitive, to turn up here as the road-agent, Silk Lasso Sam."

"His old rival got well, came to the mines to make his fortune, and here he meets Bonnie Belle, the mistress of The Frying Pan Hotel and the gambling saloon Devil's Den, who has come here to find her outlaw brother."

"Mark the result."

"Through Carrol Dean the outlaw is run to earth, escapes by the rescue of his sister, is again captured by Captain Caruth and hanged by cow-boys, while Bonnie Belle, under her name of Ruth Leigh, returns to her old home, and is to marry our colonel, who fell in love with her when she was a border girl, the idol of Yellow Dust Valley."

"Carrol Dean struck it rich, is digging a fortune out of his claim, and will soon return to his old home and loved ones to live a life of contentment and luxury."

"Now what do you want more for a novel than that, Bill?"

"Nothing, Doc, unless it is the life of Miss Nina De Sutro, who has decided to go from the fort to enter a convent and take the veil," answered the scout.

Surgeon Powell glanced quickly at the scout and asked:

"What do you know of Miss De Sutro's life, Bill?"

"That she was rescued from death by a man who afterward turned out to be Silk Lasso Sam, and then, with a large fortune at her command and scores of lovers at her feet, will give up the world for the life of a nun."

"That is so, Bill, hers has been a remarkable life," said the Surgeon Scout, yet he said no more of what he knew of it.

"I have thought that it was a love affair that caused her to decide to go into a convent, Frank."

"Indeed?"

"I may be wrong, but I had an idea that she loved Captain Dick Caruth, and when his engagement with Miss Carr was announced, she broke down, for she certainly was taken ill just after."

"Yes, and lay for a long time as you know hovering between life and death."

"But is well again now."

"Yes, about well."

"But Bill, I think Colonel Dunwoody was the one she loved, for when he announced that he was going East to get married, it was about the time of Caruth's engagement being made known to Miss Carr."

"That is true, and she cannot be blamed for loving either of them; but see, there is Deadshot Dean's cabin," and a few moments after they rode up to the door to discover the form of the miner lying upon the ground, a wound in his forehead.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WOUNDED MINER.

THE two comrades leaped from their saddles in an instant, at the sight of the miner lying prone upon the ground, and the Surgeon Scout dropped upon one knee by his side, while he placed his hand upon his heart.

"Is he dead?" asked Buffalo Bill in a low tone.

"No, his heart still beats, but this wound is fatal if the bullet entered."

"Did it enter?"

The surgeon had already opened his surgical case, and, taking out an instrument he gently probed the wound.

The probe did not enter far, but went upward following the course of the bullet directly over the skull, and under the scalp.

Just back of the head the bullet had lodged near the base of the brain.

In a few minutes it had been cut out, and the scout having brought water from the spring near by, the red stains were washed away and the wound was more thoroughly examined by the skilled surgeon.

The scout stood by breathlessly awaiting the report of his companion as to the result of the shot.

"Bill?"

"Yes, Frank."

"The skull is involved to a certain extent, but I cannot yet tell how much."

"It may be a fatal fracture, and he may pull through all right, but I am anxious about the result."

"We must get him into his bed, and then you ride to Pocket City and get certain things I need, at the same time reporting the situation to Judge Scott King."

"Yes, and sending a courier to the fort for my men, for we must run down the man who did this, Frank."

"Yes, and I will look for trails while you are gone; but just help me make him comfortable, and then go with full speed."

The miner was still insensible, and was tenderly raised and taken into the cabin, where he was placed upon his bed.

Surgeon Powell then wrote a prescription for the storekeeper, who was also a druggist, to fill, and springing upon his horse Buffalo Bill dashed away.

Making his patient as comfortable as he could, until the return of Buffalo Bill, the Surgeon Scout went out of the cabin and set to work to see what trace he could find as a clue as to how the miner had received his wound.

He began with the system of a perfect plainman, and went all about the cabin and its surroundings.

At last he mused aloud:

"Well, whoever did the deed came on foot, not on horseback, for there is no trace of any hoof-marks save those made by our horses, and the miner did not keep an animal, I believe, or if so, kept him at the stable in Pocket City."

"He was not shot while in his cabin, for he could not have come this far and then fell, as the blow of the bullet was stunning, and dropped him as though it had passed through his heart."

"The bullet is from a revolver, and not a rifle, so was not fired from an ambush, for there is no place near where he could have reached him and remained in hiding."

"No, whoever it was came here as a friend, and took advantage of an unguarded moment of the miner to kill him, for he had not on his belt of arms."

"There is a letter on the table, too, addressed to his wife, and that I shall mail to her, with a report of his wound, if he does not rally; but I fear there is a concussion which involves the brain, and I fear for the result."

"Now to see if he has been robbed, and if that were the motive that prompted the act."

He went into the cabin and a short search revealed that a thorough overhauling of the place had been gone through with.

"Yes, the place has been searched, but what has been found and taken I have no means of knowing."

"When Bill returns we will see what conclusion we can arrive at, and upon the arrival of his men from the post, we will start them upon a trail the end of which must be found."

He now went over and sat down by the wounded miner.

The breathing was less strained, and the pulse was more regular in its throbbing, so that the Surgeon Scout appeared better satisfied with his patient.

Soon after Buffalo Bill returned, and he was accompanied by the Vigilante captain and "judge" of Pocket City, Scott King, a storekeeper, and acting in the several capacities of landlord of The Frying Pan and Devil's Den, which he had purchased from Bonnie Belle, through her agent, Deadshot Dean the miner.

He was also stage agent, postmaster, and held minor offices of more or less importance—was in fact the "big man" of Yellow Dust Valley.

A man of good intentions, fearless and determined, he possessed intelligence and was respected by all.

He had brought with him a Chinese servant from the hotel, a heathen invaluable as a nurse, and who answered to the name of Jim-Jams.

Buffalo Bill had the prescription filled, and after greeting the "judge" and the Chinese the Surgeon Scout administered a dose to his patient, and awaited the result with anxiety.

CHAPTER XIV.

WORSE THAN DEATH.

THE chief of scouts had told Judge Scott King just how the surgeon and himself had been on their way to visit the miner, and how they had found him, as they at first believed, lying dead before his cabin.

The Surgeon Scout then related what he had done so far as looking up a clue was concerned, to all of which the judge listened most attentively.

As captain of the Vigilantes, and as judge of what was called by courtesy the "Criminal Court of Yellow Dust Valley," Scott King was a man whose desire was to put down lawlessness, and he was greatly dreaded by evil-doers.

"I have the honor, Surgeon Powell, to preside over, and do business in the wickedest community, I take it, upon the earth, and I have therefore to use very severe measures at times, to keep the boys from taking the town."

"This man, Carrol Dean, is an ornament to the country, and because he is square and good, he has made many foes, and before this, as you know, has gotten into trouble."

"Now my wish is to find out who has done this, and if there are a dozen of them in the work, they shall every one hang, for I intend to purify life in Yellow Dust Valley, mark my words on that, gentlemen."

They did mark his words, and they knew he was a man to do what he said.

Jim-Jams was a kind of Chinese doctor, and so was installed a nurse, and the judge said that he would return to Pocket City and set the ball rolling there to pick up a clue to the guilty ones who had fired upon the miner.

"Wait, judge, for he is coming round, and may be able to tell us who his foe is," said Surgeon Powell.

The medicine he had administered appeared to help the wounded man, for he began to rally quickly.

His wound had been skillfully dressed, and all that could be done for him was done, so that those about him could only watch and wait.

At last the eyes opened, the lips quivered, and the miner half raised up and fell backward again upon his bed.

Thus he lay motionless for some minutes when once again the eyes opened and he looked the doctor squarely in the face.

"Ha! he is all right," cried the judge.

"Thank Heaven for that," ejaculated Buffalo Bill.

"Me heap gladdee."

"Melican miner man good to Chinaman," Jim-Jams remarked.

But Surgeon Powell sat gazing straight into the face of the wounded miner.

He spoke to him, placed his hand upon his head, then made certain signs and spoke again.

Still that stare, that terrible stare of the wounded miner.

"You are among friends, Dean, for here is Buffalo Bill, and there is Judge Scott, while you certainly know me."

But no reply came to the words of the Surgeon Scout, and he continued:

"You was shot by some one, there in front of your cabin, and see, we have come to care for you and hunt down your intended assassin, so tell us all about it."

Then the lips parted for the first time, and the words came in a slow, wandering way:

"Silk Lasso Sam shot me, here, just over the heart, you see the wound, and he intended to kill me because Kathleen, my Kathleen said that she loved me."

"He fled, you know, Arden Leigh my intended murderer did, and became a road-agent in the Wild West."

"Yes, he shot me here above my heart—no, through my heart, for it pains so, it has pained me so."

Surgeon Powell arose and turned away, his strong face white and his eyes dim with the emotion that welled up from his heart.

"My God! this is worse than death, for his reason has utterly gone," cried Surgeon Powell, and had he said that the miner had just breathed his last, it could not have been a greater blow upon Buffalo Bill and Judge Scott King.

The miner still talked on in a rambling way, his mind reverting to the scenes in his life in the far past, until Surgeon Powell, after a most thorough examination of his patient, said:

"His reason is surely gone, yet whether to return or not, who can tell?"

"Perhaps it may return to him some day, but should it not, there is a chance that a very delicate surgical operation may remove the pressure upon the brain."

"If that fails, then he will be a madman up to the day of his death."

"Then what is to be done with him, Surgeon Powell?" asked the judge.

"I can see nothing else to do than to secure for him a couple of reliable nurses and keep him here until letters can be sent to his home and an answer received; but he must be watched closely and heed taken to all he says, for at any moment a word might slip out of who his foe really was."

"As it is now, I look upon one in his condition as worse than if he were really dead."

"And so do I; better lose his life than reason," was Buffalo Bill's impressive response.

CHAPTER XV.

THE BUCKSKIN TRAILERS.

WHEN Deadshot Dean at last sunk to sleep, under the influence of an opiate administered by Surgeon Powell, the three watchers went out of the cabin to sit down and have a talk over the situation.

"You think that it was an act of treachery, Doctor Powell, and not a shot from ambush?" the judge asked.

"My theory is, sir, that the man came here, and was one whom the miner did not suspect as a foe, for his belt of arms was on his bed in the cabin, and he was shot down outside."

"That's so," said Buffalo Bill.

"Now the miner had just written a letter to his wife, the one I gave you to mail, and he is dressed up in his Sunday clothes, you see, and evidently suspected no trouble."

"Whoever came here did not come on horseback, and that he came to kill and rob is evidenced by the fact that the miner was shot down, as the assassin believed, dead, and then the cabin was searched from one end to the other."

"You think so?"

"I know so, as there is every evidence of it."

"The miner was as neat and particular as an old maid, and all his things were kept in perfect order."

"Look at them now, all turned about in confusion."

"That is good proof."

"Yes, judge, but what the robber got I do not know, and I suggest that we go to the claim in the canyon and see if we can get any clew."

This they did, and they found evidence in the mine that a search had been made there for gold, which it was supposed the miner had hidden away.

In the soft dirt there were seen several tracks.

"These were not made by the miner," said Buffalo Bill, and stooping, with a piece of paper and pencil he took the exact measurement of the footprints.

Then the judge returned to the mining-camp of Pocket City, to make known to the people there the attempted assassination of Deadshot Dean, the miner of Hangman's Gulch, as he was called, for he was the only man who dwelt near the weird spot where there had been so many executions of the criminals of Yellow Dust Valley.

The miners were aroused to a very dangerous mood, by the news of Deadshot Dean's condition, and the Vigilantes were at once put to work to look up the guilty man or men.

The next morning there came winding down

the valley a band of horsemen twenty-two in number.

There was not to be found in any land their equal as horsemen, deadshots, lasso-throwers and trailers, not to speak of their desperate fighting qualities.

Every one of them was a perfect specimen of manly physique, and they were mounted upon horses as enduring as an antelope and as swift.

Armed with repeating-rifles, revolvers and a bowie-knife each, riding-saddles and bridles of the Texas pattern and costly in ornamentation, equipped with rubber blankets, serapes and a haversack of provisions, they were ready for a long or short trail, and any hardship and danger as the case might be.

They all carried a long lariat, which in their hands was a very deadly weapon.

Their faces were sunburnt to the hue of Indians, almost, and they wore their hair long, some being bearded, others clean-shaven, but all having the same daring, free-and-easy look that had made them famous as Buffalo Bill's Merry Men.

They were a cheery lot, too, some singing snatches of a song as they rode along, others chatting together, but not one wearing a face of fear or anxiety.

They rode two abreast along the trail, and a couple of pack-horses, well trained, trotted behind them.

In the lead rode two men far different in type, yet alike in their skill and indomitable pluck.

One was a man over six feet in height, with long black hair, a heavy, drooping mustache, and an eye like an eagle's.

His form was simply perfect, and he was an athlete, while what his strength and skill could not accomplish for him his deadly aim could.

His weapons were gold-mounted, and were in splendid condition, as were his saddle and other accouterments.

When I say that the scout was known as Wild Bill the reader will recognize him as one of the most famous of bordermen.

His immediate companion was a man of iron, in build shorter than Wild Bill, but as quick as a panther in his movements, while his long brown hair, bright eyes and white, even teeth, gave him a very cheery expression.

His weapons, too, were of the best, also his trappings, and he had won fame as Texas Jack, one of the great frontier trio of scouts and Indian-fighters whose name will long live in song and story, for who has not heard of the League of Three, Buffalo Bill, Wild Bill and Texas Jack.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE TRAILERS TAKE THE TRAIL.

"WELL, Jack, we will reach the chief an hour before sunset," said Wild Bill to his companion, Texas Jack, as they rode along, and the horses of the party showed that they had spared not their animals on the way.

"Yes, and there is work for us to do, or Buffalo Bill would never have sent for us in such a hurry," answered Texas Jack.

"There always is some trouble in and about Yellow Dust Valley, Jack; but as Surgeon Powell is with Bill, and instructions came by courier for both you and me, and twenty more of the best boys of the Scouts' League to come, I am sure it means that there is hot work ahead."

"I hope so, for matters have been a little stale of late at the fort, since the death of Silk Lasso Sam and the hanging of his pard."

"Yes, the Injuns even are getting on their good behavior, and under the circumstances of Colonel Dunwoody having gone East to get married, and Captain Dick Caruth's going East on his wedding tour, I am not sorry, for I am not just stuck on Colonel De Sutro as a commandant."

"Nor am I, though he's good enough for a commandant in time of peace; but give me Colonel Dunwoody every time."

"So say I, and I wish him happiness with his bride, who they do say is a beauty and awful rich."

"So I have heard, and I have heard more."

"What is that?"

"Well, it is between us, though if it is true the colonel certainly is not ashamed of it."

"I am listening, pard."

"Well, how true it is I do not know; but it is hinted that Colonel Dunwoody's wife is none other than Bonnie Belle, the Idol of Yellow Dust Valley."

"No!"

"So I have heard, but if it is so then she is a lovely woman, for she came West to save her outlaw brother from the gallows."

"Yes, and is as pure and noble a woman as lives."

"She is all that and more."

So the two scouts talked together until at last the cabin came into view and as they rode up the steep hill Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell came out to greet them.

The scouts gave a wave of their sombreros around their heads, and all saluted their chief and the Surgeon Scout, while Wild Bill said:

"We are here, Pard Bill, and on time."

"Yes, so I am glad to see, Wild Bill, for I need you all," answered Buffalo Bill.

"What's up, chief?" Texas Jack asked, for he and Wild Bill were the chief of scout's lieutenants, his right-hand men.

"Well, pard, there was an attempt made to assassinate Deadshot Dean the miner, and they might as well have carried out their intention, for the bullet glanced upon his head and has left him without reason."

"Poor fellow," cried the scouts in chorus, and then in undertones were heard anathemas against the man who had done the deed.

Buffalo Bill then told just how the miner had been found by the Surgeon Scout and himself, and that not the slightest trace of a trail could be found.

All listened with the deepest attention, and watched for the slightest clew upon which to fasten.

The surgeon and the chief of scouts watched the faces of the men anxiously.

Perhaps some one of them might see what they had failed to note in the affair.

"You say the cabin was robbed, Bill?" asked Wild Bill.

"It was searched through, though what was taken I do not know."

"And the mine?" asked Texas Jack.

"Had been visited by some one else than the miner, for his tracks are there."

"What about the men of Pocket City, chief?"

"Judge Scott King and his Vigilantes are on the lookout for any man that may fall under suspicion."

"Then we have only the clew to work on that the miner was shot by some unknown person, or persons, who left no trail to speak of, and supposed he had finished his work when he left?"

"That is all, Wild Bill."

"Well, chief, you and Surgeon Powell have some idea about who it is, of course, that we are to track?"

"On the contrary, Wild Bill, we have none, and we have all of us got to begin at the very beginning, and start in when you are rested," was Buffalo Bill's answer.

"Well, pard, we'll go down and camp on the bank in the canyon, and talk it all over after we have smoked a pipe, and I guess we can get some trace of the man who has done the work."

"All right, Surgeon Powell and myself will come to your camp this evening, as soon as the Vigilante captain arrives, for he is to let us know what his men have done in the matter."

And soon after the judge came, but it was only to state the inability of himself and men to find the slightest clew.

The whole affair was then gone over with the scouts, and the next morning early they all started upon the trail of mystery which they had to unravel as to who had been the one to fire upon the miner of Hangman's Gulch.

CHAPTER XVII.

THE FAIR EXILE.

THERE had been changes at Pioneer Post since the death, at the hands of the cowboys, of Silk Lasso Sam.

Colonel Dunwoody's letter to Ruth Leigh had been answered in a way that caused him to write again, and this was followed by his avowed intention of going East to seek a wife.

Who was to be his bride he had not publicly announced, but there were those who said that they possessed the secret that the dashing, handsome colonel was to bring back with him no less a person than she who had been known as the sister of the outlaw chief, Silk Lasso Sam, and who had spent some time upon the frontier where she was known as the Idol of Yellow Dust Valley.

Captain Caruth had found favor in the eyes of Clarice Carr, rumor had it, to that extent that she was to become his wife, and they were to start east at the time the colonel went, upon their bridal tour.

The truth was that the captain and his bride already had decided to keep their early marriage a secret, as it would only have to be explained over and over again, to make it known, and so to have the chaplain of the fort unite them again in the bonds of matrimony in the home of Major Lionel Lester.

This was done, and the happy couple had started east in the coach with Colonel Dunwoody, Horseshoe Ned the driver having draped the horses even with flags and streamers in honor of the occasion.

The artillery had fired them a parting salute, the soldiers had cheered, and the band had played "Good-by."

Captain Dick Caruth's troop had acted as escort to the station where they changed coaches, and then bade them godspeed on their way.

Lying ill in the home of her guardian and kinswoman, the De Sutros, Nina De Sutro had yet known all that was going on.

Whatever she had secretly plotted for she had lost, and if she really loved Colonel Dunwoody or Captain Caruth, in spite of her girlhood marriage to the wicked man whose death she could not but be glad of, she kept her secret to herself, and sent Mrs. De Sutro to wish the colonel, Cap-

tain Caruth and Clarice every happiness that could be theirs, the one in the step that was before him, the others in the step they had taken.

As soon as she felt able to start upon her long journey, Nina De Sutro signified her intention to do so.

What had caused that illness no one knew, it seemed.

Surgeon Powell had been devoted in his attention to her until she was reported out of danger, and when her mind had raved in delirium, he had bidden Mrs. De Sutro to allow no person in the sick-room besides herself, and the old deaf nurse the surgeon had sent over from the soldiers' hospital to care for her.

What Nina De Sutro had thus said in delirium no one knew other than the faithful kinswoman who attended her.

It is true there were many rumors about of what had caused her illness, some averring that it was from unrequited love for Colonel Dunwoody, others saying that it was Dashing Dick Caruth whom she had loved and lost, while still more could find no other reason than the result of her shock at having been kidnapped by the outlaw chief, whose death had so quickly followed, and to whom she owed her life in the long ago.

But whatever the rumors she kept her real secret, which was that she had broken down under all that had befallen her, been crushed under the bitter blow of having her secret marriage known, and her part in being forced to aid the outlaw, all of which had resulted in her being obliged to leave the fort.

That Nina De Sutro, young, beautiful, brilliant, fascinating and rich, full of life and a woman who was devoted to coquetry, should give up all to enter a convent's walls, without having received some rude blow to make her tire of her conquests and enjoyments, no one in the fort believed.

At last the day came for her departure, and she had given away to those who had been kind to her many of her pretty jewels and souvenirs.

Her handsome wardrobe fell to Mrs. DeSutro, and dressed only in a neat black traveling suit and with a small trunk, she bade farewell to all and threw herself back upon the rear seat of the coach.

She had refused an escort, and said she wished to go alone.

She gave a look about the fort as the coach moved away, and the expression upon her face was one of almost utter despair.

At last she felt that she must have some one to talk to or she would go mad.

So she called out to Horseshoe Ned to halt.

He did so promptly.

"May I ride upon the box with you, Ned?" she asked in a quivering voice.

"Indeed, miss, and it w'd be a pleasure to me of yer would do so," was the answer.

"Thank you," and she mounted to the box, and as Horseshoe Ned saw her face of despair, her quivering lips, he said:

"Poor little woman."

At this she burst into tears, and great drops at once dimmed the brave eyes of the driver who, daring any danger, melted with pity at a woman's weeping.

CHAPTER XVIII.

THE MASKED MEXICAN.

HORSESHOE NED was a man who had never been known to show fear.

He would face every danger unflinchingly.

And yet, great, strong, brave man that he was, he at once felt the influence of a woman's tears and said pleadingly:

"Lordy, miss, ef yer cries like that, for them sobs comes from your heart I knows, yer'll make me blubber like a great overgrown calf of a school-boy what gits a lickin'."

"Don't do it, miss, for ef I begins ther critters will think Injuns is arter us and run clean off with ther old hearse and dump us in Rock Creek ahead."

The expression upon Ned's face, and his words caused Nina De Sutro to suddenly change from rain to sunshine.

She burst forth into a merry peal of laughter, which, hysterical though it might be, was a great relief to Ned.

He at once said:

"That's right, miss, laugh and don't cry, for if yer is going to a convent they tells me that there is happy ones among them there, and much joy in doing good."

"Then ef yer has loved some feller as has gone back on yer, thar is jist a good fish in ther streams as ever was caught out of 'em, and maybe thet one were a cat-fish and next time yer'll land a trout."

This time Nina De Sutro laughed in earnest, while she said:

"You are indeed a comforter, Ned; but then you know if I am going to a convent it is not to fish for men."

"No, I am going to take the veil and lead a different life, for let me tell you, Horseshoe Ned, young as I am, I believe I have seen all there is of happenings in life, all there is of suffering and sorrow."

"I am going to turn my back upon the world

forever, and if I can be of any good to others, then to them will my life be devoted henceforth."

"You are too young and pretty, miss, to talk that way," said Ned, consolingly.

"I believe that it is the young and the pretty who suffer most, Ned, for such has been the result of my observation."

"And do you know that it is the man who is built more in the image of his Creator, who is the perfect type of manhood and manly beauty, who carries in his breast the blackest heart."

"I believe so, miss, for look at that reptile, Silk Lasso Sam," said the driver, little dreaming what the outlaw was to her.

At the name Nina De Sutro started, and her face paled.

"Yes, he was a noble-looking man," she said, in a meditative mood.

"There's few his equals in looks, miss, as far as form and face went, but, oh, what a villain, and I only hopes he's dead."

"Hope he is dead?" cried Nina, in a startled way.

"Yes, miss."

"Why, he is dead."

"So I has heerd, miss."

"Do you not believe it?" anxiously asked the woman.

"Waal, miss, I has heerd so often that Silk Lasso Sam was dead, and I has seen him escape from right out o' ther grip o' death, that I is not one ter believe he is dead until I has been coroner and sit on his remains."

"He was shot by the cowboys, when he sought to escape from them."

"Yes, miss, I seen Mustang Monte, and heerd all about it, and he told me thet he planted him himself six feet under ground."

"Then why do you doubt his being dead?"

"I don't exactly know, miss."

"Have you no confidence in the cowboys?"

"I has every confidence in 'em, miss, only I has a confidence that is greater in the power of Silk Lasso Sam to escape."

"Not from death, surely, Horseshoe Ned."

"I has gotten out o' death's grip so often myself, miss, that I kinder think there is chances for others."

The driver did not see the distressed look which came over the face of the woman, as his words brought to her the thought, the dread suspicion that after all her outlaw husband might still be alive.

But soon a resigned expression took the place of dread, and she said to herself:

"What have I to fear from him now, be he dead or alive?"

"My way is clear before me, for I enter the walls of a convent, there to live until I die, doing what I can to atone for what ill I have done in the past, and which, as Captain Caruth put it, were *sinless crimes*."

"No, I go my way now under a shadow no longer."

She changed the conversation now, and began to talk pleasantly to Ned of his adventures upon the road as an Overland driver.

But Ned's adventures and hair-breadth escapes had been mostly with the outlaw chief Silk Lasso Sam, and so Nina De Sutro again changed the subject.

At length the coach drove down into a lonely canyon, and Horseshoe Ned said:

"This is one o' ther places I allus was afraid of when ther road-agents was on ther trails, miss."

He had hardly uttered the words when a horseman rode out of the timber and confronted him, his revolver leveled, while he said in broken English:

"Halt! Hands up, Senor Driver, for I want toll!"

Ned halted quickly, with a muttered oath, and gazed upon the horseman, who was in Mexican costume, and wore a mask completely hiding his face.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE TOLL-TAKER.

THE eyes of Nina De Sutro became also riveted upon the masked Mexican, who had declared himself a toll-taker.

She gazed at him with a burning look, as though she would pierce the mask and disguise the man wore.

But an expression of relief came over her face as she muttered:

"No, that is not his face—no, no, he is dead."

"This man is a Mexican, surely."

Horseshoe Ned was nonplused, and showed it. He had given up all thought of being again held up on the Overland.

True, reports had come in of coaches having been lately held up on the other trails, but Horseshoe Ned had felt that his days of danger were over.

Just as he considered his coaches safe, here appeared before him this man demanding toll.

The driver and Nina beheld a man of slender form, wearing the rich costume of a Mexican gentleman.

Intensely black hair hung down his back almost to his belt, and he wore gauntlet gloves, so that, with the mask hiding his face, his hair

shielding his neck, not a particle of his skin could be seen.

He was well mounted upon a wiry Mexican horse, a jet-black, and his trappings were all elegant and manufactured in Mexico.

He carried revolvers, a knife and a lariat as weapons, and had skillfully tossed the noose of his lasso over the heads of the two leaders as he appeared, thus preventing an escape of the coach by flight.

Horseshoe Ned saw that he was cleverly caught, and the masked Mexican looked the man to use his weapons if need be.

Not another one was visible anywhere.

Yet, if the masked Mexican appeared alone, he yet might not be.

There might be others within easy call, even if not then covering the driver with their weapons from an ambush.

"Waal, who in thunder be you?" asked Horseshoe Ned, as the horseman came close up to the coach.

"I am a Mexican, senor, a ranchero in hard luck, who still remembering the war between your country and mine, feel no friendship for Americans, so seek to gather toll from them to recuperate my fallen fortunes," was the answer, in good English, but with a very decided Mexican accent, which is peculiar, and as marked as the Italian speaking our tongue.

"You are a Dago, are yer?" sneered the driver.

"I am a Mexican gentleman, senor."

"Our jails is full o' jist sich gents as you be, and I guesses one of 'em has a vacant room left fer your accommodation, so I'll engage it, Mister Dago."

"I am not here to parley, but to demand."

"Miss, you speaks ther lingo, so try him and see if he really be a Dago," and Horseshoe Ned turned to Nina, who at once said in her pure Spanish:

"Senor, a Mexican gentleman is not a highwayman, as you appear to be."

"I am of Mexican parentage and birth myself."

Instantly came the response, and in perfect Spanish, following a low bow:

"Pardon me, senorita, but my case is a peculiar one, for what I have will be swept from me unless I make certain payments within a given time."

"With no chance to raise the money, and driven to the wall, compelled to see others suffer, I have taken to the road to demand at the revolver muzzle help from others."

"Such, senorita, is my situation of misfortune."

"It is, indeed, senor, an unfortunate situation, when a gentleman has to descend to robbery to better his fortunes, and I suppose I will have to submit to be robbed by you."

Before the masked Mexican could reply Horseshoe Ned said:

"He does talk ther lingo perfect, don't he, miss, for I has a smatterin' knowledge of ther Dago tongue?"

"Yes, he is a Mexican beyond a doubt, and his choice of language shows education; but he is none the less a robber," said Nina De Sutro.

"Yes, miss; but if he is a gent, he certainly ought not ter rob a lady, so hold on there with that leetle sachel," and the driver put his hand upon that of Nina, as she had taken up her sachel to get her money.

"The senor is right, senorita, I should not rob a lady, nor will I."

"My misfortunes are not so great as to cause me to descend so low."

"It is the money-box of the stage company I am after."

"Then you gets severely left, pard, as it kain't along on this run."

"Do you mean it?" quickly asked the road-agent.

"I does, fer a fact."

"Why did you leave it behind?"

"Because the accounts were not made up by ther agent, he being sick at ther fort."

"You have no other passenger than this lady?"

"Not one."

"Where is the agent?"

"Sick at ther fort, I told yer."

"Very well, you can drive on."

"Thank yer, Dago Pard, yer is a gent arter all," and Horseshoe Ned drove on as the Mexican took his lasso off the leaders and bowed low.

"Had he demanded all of my money he would have gotten a very large sum," said Nina De Sutro with a sigh of intense relief as the coach rolled on.

CHAPTER XX.

RED COACH ROB.

BOTH Horseshoe Ned and Nina De Sutro found plenty of occupation discussing the strange toll-taker, who called himself a "Mexican gentleman in hard luck," until they came to the end of the driver's run.

Nina De Sutro had studied her course well before leaving the fort, and had decided to make her way into Mexico by the frontier coaches, rather than go East and then run

down by rail toward the Rio Grande, or sail from New York for Vera Cruz.

She knew that the trip by stages would incur much fatigue, delay, perhaps suffering and danger.

Yet she decided that she would go that way in defiance of all there was to confront her.

Her way was to take a coach out of the station where Horseshoe Ned's run ended, going southward.

This after a run of thirty miles was crossed at a relay station by the coach running to Pocket City and driven by Four-in-hand Frank, one of the best drivers on the road.

By waiting at the station for Frank's coach to pass, she could take it for some twenty miles to a branch station, where a weekly coach started southward and some fifty miles below crossed the main lower trail to the frontier of the Southwest with a terminus at Santa Fe.

From thence into Mexico she could find means of travel, rough though they might be.

It was with deep regret that Horseshoe Ned bade his lovely passenger farewell, and gave her over to the charge of Red Coach Rob, the driver who was to take her on the run across Four-in-hand Frank's trail.

Red Coach Rob was a good driver, and had the eccentricity of being devoted to carmine as a color.

He had once worked in a coaching paint-shop, and was an artist with a brush, so always painted his coach a bright red hue, relieving it by black trimmings.

His horses were blood-bays, his reins were red web, and each animal was set off by a plume of crimson feathers.

His whip was also red, and a coral miniature whip, made into a pin and looping up his hat, was what he called his "crest."

He was a little man, but a giant in strength, as nimble as a cat, and was said to resemble the feline race in that he could see as well by night as day.

Whether true or not he drove over a very wild road by night.

He received his instructions from Horseshoe Ned calmly, greeted Nina DeSutro most politely and seemed pleased when she asked him if she could ride upon the box with him.

"Yes, miss, if you'll let me strap you on, for we go through by night, you know, and the road is a terror, and one is apt to take a plunge if not made fast."

"I will be glad to submit to regulations, Mr. Red Coach Rob," was the reply.

The start was made at midnight, and Nina was promptly in her seat, having been called at eleven and given supper, for she had retired to rest just after her arrival with Horseshoe Ned.

The latter was there to see her off, and there were two other passengers, both of whom settled themselves upon the back seat for comfortable sleep, an act which made Red Coach Rob smile grimly, as he whispered to Nina:

"They'll be bobbing about like chips in a mill-race before long, miss."

"Of course the news of the hold-up of Horseshoe Ned's coach had become known, and as Red Coach Rob started upon his drive he led Nina DeSutro on to talk of it.

"I happen to have such a rough run of it, miss, that few passengers go my way, and the mail is not often worth robbing, so I escape being held up," Red Coach Rob said.

"Were you never held up, sir?" asked Nina.

"Yes, miss, twice."

"And robbed?"

"I would have been, miss, but for an accident."

"What was the accident, may I ask?"

"Yes, miss, I killed the two men who held me up."

"Ah!"

"Their graves we pass and I'll point them out to you, for one I always stop at."

"You do?"

"Yes, miss."

"Are you compelled to stop there?"

"No, miss, it is voluntary on my part."

"How strange that is."

"I'll tell you why, miss, and it is a confession I have never made to any one."

"I appreciate your confidence, sir."

"No, I can tell it to you, and ask your advice, for I can talk to you."

"I wish too, to learn your opinion as to how guilty I am."

"Anything that I can say for you I will esteem it a pleasure to do."

"I feel that, miss, and I'll tell you the story if you don't mind listening."

"I will be glad to."

"One of those graves, miss, I pass by with only the feeling that my hand dug it."

"I feel that I acted in self-defense, to protect the Government mails, and that I took a man's life, one who sought mine."

"Of course I cannot but feel sometimes that there was some one to love him, that he was a baby boy once with a fond mother to watch over him and guard him, and loving ones may be waiting and longing for his coming home now."

"This makes me feel sad, when I think I was forced to place him in his grave."

"Do you see that clump of trees there on the right, miss?"

"Yes."

"His grave is there, and as I go by slowly you will see a white headboard I placed there, and which bears the inscription:

"UNKNOWN."

"Killed by Red Coach Rob, May 1st, 18—."

He drew rein as he came to the road-agent's grave, and Nina saw the white board, but could not, of course, read the inscription in the darkness.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE NIGHT RIDE.

MINER DE SUTRO could not but feel that the driver under whose care she now was, was more than an ordinary man.

She knew that the drivers of the Overland, like the scouts of the plains, and the cowboys, many of them, were far above the average of men; that their ranks were full of men who had received college educations, had once been rich, had held influential positions, and yet had been driven to the border by circumstances beyond their control.

Where there was the right stuff in them, be they scouts, soldiers, guides, stage-drivers or cowboys, they rose above the level, and the result was, became trusted and honored by those with whom they came in contact.

In Red Coach Rob, this calm-faced, dignified little man, she now saw a hero.

She gazed at the road-agent's grave an instant, and then the coach rolled on.

For the next ten miles there was no chance for conversation, for the trail was a "terror," and it caused the driver to devote all his skill and nerve to his horses and his coach.

"They're getting it now," muttered the driver, as he heard muttered oaths from the two men in the coach, who had been disturbed from their sleep by being dashed about the coach.

Nina quickly realized how valuable an aid her straps were, which held her in her seat, for without them she would have gone flying from the box time and again.

Yet, as the sailor becomes accustomed to the pitching of his vessel, so had Red Coach Rob become skillful in holding his position, and he drove with the greatest of ease.

At last the mountain had been crossed, the valley had been reached the coach stopped in a stream, when the horses were allowed to stand above their knees in water to cool them off.

Nina gave a sigh of relief, and the driver had indeed become a hero in her eyes after his skillful manipulation of the reins through the dangers they had just passed.

"Now, miss, I want to tell you my story, for we will soon be at the other grave, and there I halt awhile, as I told you."

The coach rolled on once more and half an hour beyond came to a halt just where the trail wound along a stream.

There was quiet and easy going now, and the two passengers had quickly dropped off to sleep.

Halting on the banks of the stream, where there was a clump of trees amid some bowlders grouped about, the driver said:

"There is the grave, miss."

With this he opened the locker in his box, and taking from it a bunch of wild flowers, wrapped in wet paper, he dismounted and walked into the shadow of the trees.

He had asked the woman to dismount also, and she had done so in silence.

There she beheld a grave, and at its head was a white cross of wood.

Lighting a match Red Coach Rob held it to the cross, and cut into it were letters which read:

"IN MEMORY OF

AN UNFORTUNATE MAN.

"God knows best the Right and Wrong of it."

The match burned out but Nina DeSutro had read the strange inscription.

She had also seen that upon the grave, which was neatly kept, were a dozen of withered bunches of wild flowers.

She saw Red Coach Rob stoop and place those he had upon the grave, and his head was uncovered as he did so.

Then he said, in a voice that was hoarse with emotion:

"Let us go on our way, miss."

She mounted to her seat again, and as the coach rolled on the driver said:

"You think the scene you have just witnessed miss, a strange one."

"Let me explain the mystery as I promised you I would."

"In that grave lies a man whom I knew in my boyhood. He was a wild, wayward boy, and would not listen to the teachings of good parents. His father died and then his mother hoped for a change of heart in him, but in vain."

"He soon brought her gray hairs in sorrow to the grave, for he was her idol of all she had to love. It was the act of his killing a man and flying from home that was the death-blow to her."

"Upon her death-bed she begged her other children to pledge themselves, if in their power, to find and reform the truant youth."

"The family was broken up in time, drifting apart. One son came to the far West and tried to make a fortune. That son was myself, miss, for I came to the frontier, and you see what I am to-day, the driver of an Overland coach."

"I frequently have lonely runs, as I told you, and one night I was held up back yonder at the grave by a road-agent."

"I had my revolver in hand too quick for him, and having a box of treasure along that night I was watchful."

"We fired together, he killing one of my wheel-horses, which checked my running off, and I wounded him, for he fell in his tracks."

"I dismounted from my box and went to him, for he was groaning in anguish, and I felt very sorry for him."

"Well, miss, he told me he had been a bad man, had begun his wicked deeds in boyhood, and he wished me to write home and tell his poor mother that her words had come true, that he had met with a bad end."

"Then he gave me his name, miss, and I broke down when I knew that it was my own wild, wayward brother I had killed."

"He died in my arms, miss, and I returned the next day and buried him, and for our mother's sake, when the wild flowers are blooming, I always stop at his grave and put them upon it."

"That is the whole story, miss," and as the driver turned toward Nina DeSutro he saw that his sympathetic story had touched her heart, for she was weeping.

CHAPTER XXII.

THE SECOND TIME.

NINA DE SUTRO had known sorrow enough herself to feel deepest sympathy for the driver, whose strange story she had heard.

She had a sympathetic nature, and his confession to her of his secret touched her deeply, and she said in her sweet way, a way she so well knew how to assume:

"You have indeed been a sufferer, and I feel for you."

"I appreciate your trust in me, and I cannot but say that you certainly are not to be condemned for your shot in self-defense, and in the darkness did not know who it was that you aimed at."

"No, no, do not censure yourself, Red Coach Rob, for you are blameless altogether."

"I thank you, miss, for saying so, and I feel better over it now."

"But I could never write them at home of what had happened."

"I think you were right, sir, for it is better so; but is that not the day coming yonder?"

"Yes, miss, daylight will soon be here, now we have gotten over the worst part of the road."

Just as they came to a steep hill, and one which was a dangerous one to descend, demanding all of the driver's skill and strength to manage his team, there came a shadowy form out of the timber and a loud hail in broken English:

"Halt!"

"Hands up until the toll is paid!"

Red Coach Rob was known as a driver who always showed fight, with the chances at all in his favor.

He had the reputation along the Overland Trails of being recklessly brave, and had often saved his passengers from being robbed, and the mail, by his pluck.

But now he was caught with his foot upon the brake, and bracing himself to his work, both hands being hard pressed to carry the coach through in safety.

To release his grip upon the reins and seize a revolver would wreck his coach and kill his passengers.

So he could only call to his team to halt, and thus hold them, while he said:

"You have the advantage, for I cannot let go my reins to fire, and I cannot hold up my hands else I wreck my coach."

"There is a lady on the box with me, so don't you fire."

"All right, drive on to the bottom of the hill, and beware not to trick me," and the horseman rode close by the coach, his revolver upon the driver.

A hundred feet away a place of safety was reached, and Red Coach Rob promptly halted, and as promptly raised his hands.

He was not the man to protect himself by the presence of a woman, or to draw a fire with a woman by his side.

"Well, what is your will?" he asked, as in the dim, gray light of dawn he gazed down at the road-agent.

"To collect toll," was the reply.

"I carry no treasure, and my mail has no moneyed letters, for people don't send money to the mines, as it would be like carrying coals to Newcastle."

"You have passengers?"

"Yes."

"How many?"

"Two."
 "Who are they?"
 "This lady and two gentlemen inside the coach."
 "Who are they?"
 "I have only a speaking acquaintance with my passengers."
 "Have they money?"
 "I am not their banker."
 "Permit me, senor, to introduce myself as one you have met before."

At the words of the woman the horseman started.

He had evidently not expected to see Nina De Sutro on that coach, and enveloped as she was in a blanket, he had failed to recognize her, for the man was the road-agent of Horseshoe Ned's trail, the masked Mexican.

"Ah! you are the Mexican senorita?" said the robber, again speaking in Spanish.

"I am, senor, and have you repented your good deed before and now intend to rob me?"

"Oh, no, I shall not rob you of a peso, senorita."

"But these two male passengers must pay the score."

The two passengers in the coach groaned, for they had overheard and seen all.

"Come, senors, I am not a man to trifle with, so hand out your money, for I brook no delay."

"I have no money," growled one.

"Nor have I," the other added.

"Perhaps should I search your dead bodies I could find money."

"If you prefer that I should search you dead, to your doing so living, say so."

"No, I will give you what I have, though it will ruin me," and the man turned out a buckskin bag of gold.

"And there is my pile," and the other handed out a roll of bills.

"Thanks, senors, these offerings will do until we meet again."

"Adios, senorita."

"Drive on, senor!" and the road-agent raised his hat and sat gazing after the departing stage until it was out of sight.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE THIRD TIME.

THAT Red Coach Rob was greatly worried over his stage being held up, Nina De Sutro saw as they drove along.

His face had grown dark and stern, and he seemed mortified that his passengers had been robbed.

They, meanwhile, were chuckling over their luck, for they had given up a belt of gold and roll of bills, amounting to a few hundred dollars each, while they had saved many thousands of dollars which they had secreted about them.

This fact they soon made known to Red Coach Rob, who seemed greatly relieved by it, for he had been told at the station that his two passengers both carried a large sum of money.

This pleased the driver, as also the fact that Nina De Sutro had not been robbed.

"So that was the same fellow what held up Horseshoe Ned's coach, miss?" he asked.

"The very same."

"He is a Mexican, for you spoke to him in Spanish, and his English was broken."

"Yes, he claims to be a Mexican gentleman in hard luck trying to raise money by robbery, to save his home from being taken from him by debt."

"Well, I'll say nothing against his chivalry as he refrained from robbing you, but if he again catches me on the trail I shall endeavor to be better prepared for him."

"He seems to be making the tour of the different stage trails, for he held up Horseshoe Ned's coach yesterday morning, on the Pioneer Post trail, and now yours, while I believe there was another halted some days before up north of the fort."

"Yes, miss, so I heard, and he will bear watching."

"I shall speak to Four-in-hand Frank about him, as he will then be upon his guard; but at any rate you appear to be safe."

"With him, yes, and it is well that I am, for I carry considerable money with me, and have also some valuable jewels in my sachel."

Just at sunrise the coach rolled into the Cross Trail Station, where Red Coach Rob's run ended.

It was a desolate place, but the driver secured the best accommodations he could for his fair passenger.

The two male passengers were to wait there for the coach going eastward, which was semi-monthly run, not starting for a couple of days; but Four-in-hand Frank was to pass in a couple of hours and he would carry Nina De Sutro on her way until he crossed the track of the southwest bound coach some miles below, also at a relay station.

Four-in-hand Frank came through on time, and his halt there was for half an hour, so that Red Coach Rob had a talk with him, telling him about his fair passenger, and having been held up by a masked Mexican.

"It may be your turn next, Frank," he added.

"I'll be on the lookout for him, pard, but I

has nothin' ter be robbed of on this trip, and yer says he don't rob ladies?"

"No."

"Who is she?"

"A lady from the fort, going to Mexico to enter a convent, so Horseshoe Ned told me."

"Did yer catch her name?"

"It is De Sutro."

"Oh! I know her, for she were the one Silk Lasso Sam run off with along with Miss Clarice Carr, ter hold fer ransom."

"They war rescued by Buffalo Bill and Surgeon Powell, and stopped a day or so at Pocket City fer rest, afore going to the fort."

"Yes, she is one of those ladies, for she told me how Silk Lasso Sam had kidnapped them."

"Well, he's quit kidnapping now, but I must be on ther watch for this Mexican gent," and Four-in-hand Frank went forward to meet Nina De Sutro as she came from the cabin station.

She accepted his invitation to ride upon the box with him, shook hands warmly with Red Coach Rob, in bidding him farewell, and had him refuse a money present she had offered; then she mounted her seat beside the new driver.

She found Four-in-hand Frank entertaining, and knew him to be a brave man and skillful with the reins; but, she did not feel the interest in him which she had felt in Red Coach Rob.

It was just noon when Frank, endeavoring to please his beautiful passenger, by telling her of his exploits as an Overland driver, was startled by a loud cry from behind his coach to come to a halt.

He turned, as did Nina De Sutro also, to find a horseman riding by the side of his coach and covering him with his revolver, while he heard the words:

"Draw rein, quick, and hands up!"

Four-in-hand Frank uttered a deep imprecation, but he obeyed the threatening command at the same time.

His foot went hard upon the brake, his reins dragged his team back suddenly, and then up went his hands.

He had been fairly caught, he knew. Watching ahead for any danger, it had come from behind.

The horseman had heard the rumble of his coach, and in a narrow canyon had waited, riding out as it passed, for in the soft, sandy road his horse had made no sound which the noise of the wheels had not drowned.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A CHANGE OF MIND.

"It is my shadower, the masked Mexican."

Such was the comment of Nina De Sutro, when she beheld the horseman who had halted the coach of Four-in-hand Frank.

The spot was a weird one, a narrow canyon with high, overhanging sides, the tops fringed with lofty trees which arched far over, causing the vale to be dark and damp, the light there being little more than a dim torchlight.

"That's ther feller, be he, miss?" asked Frank, as the horseman came close alongside, still covering him with his revolver.

"I is glad it is so, miss, for you is safe," replied the driver.

The masked Mexican now halted and looked up at the driver and his passenger.

He said as he did so:

"Come, senor, I want my toll!"

"I hasn't got a dollar ter save my soul."

"I knows better than ter carry it," said Frank.

"That is an old story."

"You can search me, Pard Thief."

"I will have to ask the lady to pay for you then."

"Will you rob me now, senor, after having twice spared me before?" asked Nina De Sutro in Spanish.

The horseman started, gazed fixedly into her face and said, also in Spanish:

"Twice spared you before, senorita?"

"Yes, senor, when I was under the care of Horseshoe Ned, upon the Pioneer Post trail, and again last night when I rode with Red Coach Rob on the Cross Cut Trail."

"Have you so soon forgotten, senor, and that you told me you were a Mexican gentleman seeking gold, but yet could not rob a lady?"

"Yes, yes, senorita, so I told you then."

"But I have changed my mind now, and you must pay the toll I demand."

"If it is a demand, yes, senor, I will pay it."

"You are wise."

"Name the amount of your demand, senor."

"I must have all that you possess, senorita."

"At, senor, let me tell you that I am one who is going to Mexico, to my native land, your land as you told me but yesterday, to enter a convent and take the veil."

"What I have with me I have bestowed upon the church, and surely, senor, you would not rob the church I feel?"

She pleaded earnestly, but not being able to see the masked face she knew not the effect of her words until he spoke.

Then he said, and his voice was harsh and stern:

"If I would rob a woman, senorita, I would not hesitate at robbing a church."

"The church is rich and can afford to lose what you have to give it."

"Remember, senor, I am going to take the veil."

"Perhaps your past life has been such that you need to atone for it by a life of repentance, prayer and good deeds."

She started at his harsh words, but replied:

"Senor, I shall give you the money you demand."

"Here it is."

She handed down to him a roll of bills, he taking them with one hand, while with the other he still kept Four-in-hand Frank covered with his revolver.

"Now I hopes yer is satisfied, yer has been mean enough ter rob a woman," said the driver savagely.

"Silence, or you may lose your life, having no money," was the threatening response.

Then turning again to the woman he said:

"I may be rich enough some day to return thi money to you for the church, so tell me the name you will bear, and the convent that will be your home."

"It is the Convent of the Sacred Sisters of the Dead Heart, and my name there will be Sister Salome."

"I shall remember both the convent and the nun."

"But do you tell me that this is all the money you have?"

"I did not say so."

"Have you more with you?" came the direct query.

His eyes were fastened upon her face and he must have seen the expression there, for he said sharply:

"You are deceiving me!"

She was silent and bowed her head.

"Hand me that sachel!"

She hesitated.

"Hand me that sachel, senorita, or I shall put a bullet through the brain of this driver," cried the masked Mexican horseman in a voice there was no mistaking was in deadly earnest.

She uttered a cry, but obeyed, while Frank stretched forth his hand to, check her, with the remark:

"Don't do it, miss, for he won't shoot."

The flash and report of the Mexican's revolver answered; the driver felt a twinge of pain in the end of his middle finger, for the bullet had clipped it off!

"That as a warning; now obey!" came the words of the Mexican.

The sachel was handed down and he tossed up the roll of bills she had just given him, with the remark:

"You will need this for expenses on your way. I will keep the balance. Now, drive on!"

With an execration Frank obeyed, and the masked road-agent was soon left far behind.

"Four-in-hand Frank?" at last, said Nina De Sutro.

"Yes, miss."

"Halt, now, and let me tie up your hand."

"You hain't afraid of the sight of blood, miss?"

"No, indeed!"

"Then I'll thank you to, miss," was the driver's reply, as he came to a halt.

CHAPTER XXV.

NINA'S SUSPICION.

FOUR-IN-HAND FRANK had halted at a small brook, and dismounting had aided Nina down from the box.

She had taken her own handkerchief, tore it in strips, and soon dressed the wounded finger as well as she could, it having been shot off to the first joint.

"It was a shame, miss, to take all your money, as he did; but if you wants more, and will go on ter Pocket City with me, instead o' taking the coach down the Southwest Trail, I'll git it for you, and be glad ter do it," said the generous-hearted driver.

"You are very kind, Four-in-hand Frank, and I appreciate it; but let me tell you that though he did get my jewels, which I had intended as an offering to the convent, and a thousand dollars in money, also to be given to the Church, I had fortunately put away in my dress a much larger sum."

"I is awful glad ter hear yer say so, miss."

"Then he gave me back the first I handed to him, and there are several hundred dollars in that roll, enough to take me to my destination."

"Yes, he evidently thought he was getting more than he did, when he glanced into the sachel, and—but, hark!"

The driver had also caught the sound.

It was of troops approaching.

At first the fear came to Nina De Sutro that the road-agent was returning to force her to give up more money.

But the driver said:

"They are coming from in front of us miss."

A moment after there rode into sight half a dozen men.

The face of Nina De Sutro flushed and paled as she recognized those in advance, while Frank gave a perfect war-whoop of delight and cried:

"Buffalo Bill and Texas Jack!"

The horsemen spurred forward rapidly now and Buffalo Bill bowed low as he recognized Nina De Sutro, while he glanced at the bandaged hand of the driver and said:

"I hope that you have had no trouble, Miss De Sutro, on your journey southward?"

"I have, Mr. Cody, and I wish to have a talk with you alone; but first let me tell you that a few miles back, in a deep canyon, we were held up by a masked Mexican, and I was robbed of money and jewels amounting to a considerable sum."

"Ha! this is indeed startling tidings, and I will hasten on and—"

"No, send Texas Jack and your men, for you I wish to talk with, and you can join them later."

Buffalo Bill saw that Nina De Sutro was very much in earnest, and after a few words with Frank, he bade Texas Jack and the other four scouts go rapidly on to the scene of the hold-up and discover all they could by the time of his arrival.

Then, while the driver looked over his harness, the scout turned to Nina and said:

"Now, Miss De Sutro, I am at your service."

"You of course know, Mr. Cody, that I am on my way to Mexico?"

"Yes, Miss De Sutro, I heard as much, or that you were to start as soon you were able to do so."

"I am to enter a convent there and take the veil."

Buffalo Bill bowed.

"I brought with me, however, certain jewels and money to the amount of nearly five thousand dollars."

"A large sum to travel with."

"I have discovered so, having been relieved of part of it; but supposing there would be no danger, since Silk Lasso Sam is dead, I concluded to trust to good fortune to get through."

"And you were robbed?"

"Yes."

"Held up on the trail by a masked Mexican," Frank said.

"I have been held up three times, Buffalo Bill, since leaving Pioneer Post."

The scout started at this.

Then he asked:

"Do you mean it?"

"I most certainly do."

"Pray tell me all about it, Miss De Sutro."

"Well, I was first held up when with Horseshoe Ned."

"Ah! and robbed?"

"No."

"And again?"

"When with Red Coach Rob."

"And robbed?"

"No."

"And again awhile since for the third time?"

"Yes."

"And robbed?"

"Yes."

"Why not the first time?"

"The robber never robbed a lady."

"Indeed?"

"He was chivalrous."

"Very."

"And the second time?"

"For the same reason."

"Two chivalrous road-agents that you have met."

"No."

"How so?"

"They were one and the same."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, he came across to Red Coach Rob's trail."

"Yes, that could be easily done."

"It was done."

"Describe the man, please, Miss De Sutro."

"He was a masked Mexican."

"The last one?"

"Yes, and the first one."

"And yet they were not the same man? for the one who robbed you on the post trail, again with Red Coach Rob, and the third time with Frank, could readily have cut across country and done so."

"He could, but I tell you emphatically, Buffalo Bill, the man who held me up twice before was not the one who did so the third time," was the impressive answer of Miss De Sutro.

CHAPTER XXVI.

RIVAL ROBBERS.

BUFFALO BILL tried hard to believe that Nina De Sutro was mistaken, for how could there be two masked Mexican robbers upon the trails, and, from all he had heard, closely resembling each other in size, make-up and with horses and trappings alike?

"I can believe, Miss De Sutro, that there is one Mexican on the trails who is holding people up, and I'll tell you why."

"Some time before I left the fort on the scout I am now on, in my absence Colonel De Sutro sent Mustang Monte, a cowboy, upon a mission of importance, ignoring my scouts wholly."

"Mustang Monte is as good a man as he could have gotten, but then he is a cowboy, not a scout, and the work belonged to us."

"That work was to bring to the fort a certain amount of money which the colonel needed for his own use, and which he feared to have come through on the coaches."

"Mustang Monte went to the station, got the money, started back with it and was held up by a mounted highwayman, a masked Mexican."

"He was lariat and dragged from his saddle, so had no chance to resist."

"He was somewhat hurt by the fall, but was happy in having stuffed the two packages of money in the large leather stirrups, and they thus escaped the eye of the road-agent."

"He described the Mexican as a tall, slender man, dressed in a handsome costume of a gentleman of Mexico, and with a masked face, and wearing gauntlet gloves."

"He described his horse, and also his trappings and saddle, as being from Mexico."

"The highwayman spoke in broken English, but when Mustang Monte addressed him in Spanish, he spoke the language perfectly."

"Mustang Monte was allowed to go upon his way, and he reported his adventure to Colonel De Sutro, and delivered up to him his money."

"The colonel, as you may know, is of a suspicious nature, and supposed that Mustang Monte only wished to claim a large reward for having saved his money, so he sent me secretly to the scene to see if I could discover any trace of what had occurred."

"Surgeon Powell accompanied me, and we did find where the Mexican had been in ambush, where his horse was hitched for hours, and that all had been as Mustang Monte had said, for there were the tracks of the two men, and we picked up several of the buttons from the costume of the Mexican."

"We reported our discovery to Colonel De Sutro, who sent for Mustang Monte then, to reward him, but found that he had been paid off that morning by Cowboy Charlie, his captain, and had left the fort, going no one knew where."

"Then Surgeon Powell and myself started for Pocket City on a little investigating tour, and discovered that Deadshot Dean, the miner, whom you know, Miss De Sutro, had been shot by some one—"

"Killed?"

"No, worse, for the wound was in his head, and has affected his brain, and I fear he will be a madman for life."

"Poor fellow."

"I sent for my men, and tried to find some clew to the intended murderer, but thus far in vain."

"Surgeon Powell started with poor Dean to the fort, and he will keep him there until he hears from his people, and I made another effort, with the men you saw with me, to find some trace of this man whom I would give a year's pay to catch."

"I hope that you may."

"And now, Miss De Sutro, you tell me that you were held up when with Horseshoe Ned, again with Red Coach Rob, and but now with Four-in-hand Frank, and by a masked Mexican, but you assert that the one who robbed you was not the one who twice before spared you?"

"I do, Buffalo Bill."

"And that there are two of those Mexicans in the field?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps there are, for Mustang Monte was also held up by a masked Mexican."

"That may have been one of those whom I saw."

"Why do you believe there were two men?"

"I can hardly tell, and yet I noticed a difference in them."

"What difference?"

"I do not believe I can describe it, but it was in a tone of voice, in one instance, and in the appearance of the horse, in another, though both were alike and excellent matches, as were their riders."

"Then too, it seems to me, that there was a difference in the weapons of the two men."

"Well, you may be right, and you are the best judge, Miss De Sutro, having seen them, if two there are."

"And I wished to tell you alone, Buffalo Bill, that there were two, for you could act accordingly, and have the advantage of knowing it if there are two."

"I thank you, Miss De Sutro, and I will keep the secret to myself."

"But, what does Frank think?"

"He saw but one, sir, and I did not suggest to him that there were two."

"Ah, yes, and as the last one robbed you, after all you may be right."

"Now, Miss De Sutro, I will bid you good-by, and I wish for you every happiness in the life you have chosen, though I cannot see just how you will find it."

"I will find happiness, Mr. Cody, in doing my duty."

"Good-by, and report to Colonel and Mrs. De Sutro that you saw me this far upon my way, and what had occurred."

"I will tell them all," and the scout rode on his way, while, mounting his box, Four-in-hand Frank drove on to the station where Nina De Sutro was to catch the Southwest coach on the trail to Santa Fe.

CHAPTER XXVII.

NO CLEW.

It had been with the deepest regret that Buffalo Bill heard the reports of his most expert scouts that no trace whatever could be found of the one who had shot Deadshot Dean, the miner.

The Vigilantes had made the same report to the judge, and at last it was decided that the scouts must return to the fort, and Judge Scott King would send word if anything turned up that proved a clew.

Surgeon Powell hoped still to be able to aid the miner, so said that he would take him back to the fort with him, and do all in his power for him.

This being decided upon, the judge closed the cabin of the miner and it was doubly locked, the mine also being fastened up with heavy timbers cut for the purpose.

At the last moment Buffalo Bill said:

"Doc, you go with Wild Bill and the rest of the boys to the fort, excepting Texas Frank and four men whom I will keep with me."

"I will make another effort to see what can be done to solve this mystery, and then make my way to the fort around by the trails of Four-in-hand Frank, Red Coach Rob and Horseshoe Ned, for I may be able to pick up some information at the stations regarding this masked Mexican."

Surgeon Powell deemed this a good plan, and so they parted.

It was that very day that Buffalo Bill and his party met Four-in-hand Frank's coach with Nina De Sutro a passenger, and heard about the robbery by the masked Mexican.

"I was playing in big luck to come this way," said the chief of scouts to himself as he rode along after parting with the coach.

"I hope that Jack will have struck the fellow's trail by the time I get there, and as he will not suspect help being near, he will not travel very far before halting, I take it."

Then, as he rode along his thoughts reverted to the sad fate of Nina De Sutro, and he mused:

"Now, that is one of the most beautiful women I ever saw, and yet her life is surely an unhappy one, or else why bury herself in a convent?"

"It is true that Miss Carr, and Bonnie Belle, or rather Miss Ruth Leigh, whom the colonel is to bring back with him as his bride, are both most beautiful—yes, if anything more so than Miss De Sutro, but the latter has my sympathy, for she certainly has been hit some hard blow, and I am confident that Captain Caruth and Surgeon Powell know just what it is."

"Poor girl, I wish her happiness anyhow, and regret that she had to be robbed to add to her other miseries."

"I believe she is half right, too, about there being two of these masked Mexicans, though I will keep that suspicion to myself, for the present at least."

"Now, who can this fellow, or fellows, be?"

"If there be two, are they rival robbers of the trail, or are they two pards who have gone in to pool their winnings in the game of hold up?"

"Well, we run down Silk Lasso Sam to his grave after a long trail of it, and this, or these, masked gentlemen must share the same fate."

"Ah! there is one of the boys now, and he does not look as happy as he would had he struck it rich."

The chief now urged his horse on and soon came up with the scout, who called out:

"Nothing to report, chief."

"Where is Texas Jack?"

"In the canyon."

"Can you find no trails?"

"None, sir."

They soon reached Texas Jack, who said in a disconsolate way:

"Bill, that fellow is a sharper."

"How so, Jack?"

"See this bottom?"

"Wet sand."

"Yes, the brook overflows above and soaks the whole canyon, so that a track fades away in the wet sand soon after it is made."

"That is so; but Frank said that the fellow was hiding in a narrow crevice in the rocks, let him pass, and rode on after him."

"Yes, there is where he was hiding, for his tracks are there, or rather those of his horse; but the canyon ends fifty feet back from this one, so he could not go that way, or come."

"No, he came down the stage-trail into the canyon, laid in wait, robbed the coach and went back the same way."

"And the stage-trail?"

"Is a hard one, both in approaching and leaving this wet canyon, so that the hoof of a horse leaves but slight impression."

"True, but it will when it turns off from the trail."

"Yes, and now you have come, we can go on and try to find it."

"Yes, Jack, for we must find this masked Mexican, as he got a big haul from Miss De Sutro."

"I only hope we may catch him, and if we do we will see that he does not escape, for it is a

shame when a Mexican can come up into our country and rob our coaches, that is if he is a Mexican."

"Do you doubt it, Jack?"

"I don't know, Bill, for these road-agents are perfect sharps at disguises," was Texas Jack's answer, as he rode on with his chief to search for the trail of the robber.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE REPORTS ALL IN.

SURGEON POWELL had reached Pioneer Post with his patient and the escort of scouts, to learn that the fort was excited over the report of Horseshoe Ned, of the hold-up by the masked Mexican upon his run out with Nina De Sutro.

Horseshoe Ned had not started back to the fort on his return trip for several days, as he always delayed at the station for the next incoming coach, and hence he had seen Red Coach Rob on his return, and learned that the masked Mexican had also held up his coach, and sparing Nina De Sutro as before, had robbed his two other passengers.

Horseshoe Ned had reported all to Colonel De Sutro, the acting commandant, and the result was that the fort was greatly excited over the occurrence.

It then leaked out that Mustang Monte had also been held up by a masked Mexican, and the result was that a dread was felt that there was to be another reign of terror, equal to that which Silk Lasso Sam had caused for a long while.

With Buffalo Bill and his scouts absent, Colonel De Sutro knew not just what to do, and so waited for their return.

Then Surgeon Powell came in with the greater part of the scouts, and brought in the wounded miner, who, though able to ride to the fort, was still not in his right senses, and it was thought never would be.

The Surgeon Scout reported to Colonel De Sutro the mysterious wounding of the miner, and Major Lester was called in to the council, but nothing could be decided upon as to what should be done before the return of Buffalo Bill.

"It is fortunate that Colonel Dunwoody and Captain Caruth are not to return for several weeks yet, so that we will have ample time to guard the trails, as it would be a great misfortune for this masked Mexican to hold up the coach in which they were returning with their brides," said Major Lester.

"Yes, indeed, for he would surely get a good haul in treasures," answered Colonel De Sutro, whose mind ran to the pecuniary point of the hold-up.

"I was thinking more of the shock to the ladies," was Major Lester's somewhat short rejoinder, while not noticing it, the colonel said again:

"Yes, they would lose all their bridal gifts and they must be many and costly."

"I only hope that would be all they would lose, Colonel De Sutro, for you know that neither Colonel Dunwoody or Captain Caruth would submit very tamely to the demands of a road-agent," Surgeon Frank Powell said.

"Ah yes, that is so, and they might be shot if they resisted."

"That would be bad for Dunwoody," and Lieutenant-Colonel De Sutro did not look very sad over the thought that the colonel's death would be his promotion to the command. The lieutenant-colonel was not a popular man, and it was with difficulty that both Major Lester and Surgeon Powell could restrain themselves from returning a very cutting remark, as they felt certain that were Colonel Dunwoody shot by a road-agent in resisting the outrage of robbery, it would be exactly what would suit the hopes of De Sutro.

Two days after Buffalo Bill and his party arrived at the fort, their horses well wearied by a long jaunt.

The chief of scouts at once went to the quarters of Surgeon Powell, and asked him to go with him to report to the colonel.

"You go alone, Bill, and I will stop by for Major Lester and join you there," was the answer.

The chief of scouts had just been admitted to the presence of Lieutenant-Colonel De Sutro, when Major Lester and Surgeon Powell arrived.

"Ah, gentlemen, glad you have come, for I was just going to send my orderly after you," said the acting commandant.

Then Buffalo Bill made his report, since leaving Surgeon Powell, and which told of his meeting Four-in-hand Frank's coach, with Miss De Sutro dressing the driver's wounded hand, and the report both had given of the last hold-up and robbery by the masked Mexican.

This was startling news, and seemed to affect Lieutenant-Colonel De Sutro greatly, when it was known to him that Nina, his late ward, had really lost her gems and considerable money.

"I heard all that Miss De Sutro had to tell, sir, and then started on after Texas Jack and my men, whom I had sent on ahead," resumed Buffalo Bill.

"It was a matter of utter impossibility to find the outlaw's trail, so well had he chosen his

scene of action in a damp, sandy canyon which left no tracks longer than a few minutes, it was so wet.

"I went on the trail hoping to find where he had left it, but in vain, and the same was the case with the spot where Red Coach Rob's coach had been held up, and Horseshoe Ned's also."

"The man knows the country well and selected the very spots for his act, where his approach and departure left no tracks," said the chief of scouts.

"Then I am to understand, Buffalo Bill, you give up trying to find this road-agent?"

"You are to understand, Colonel De Sutro, if you know me, that I give up no trail until I see the end of it, and my men are like me in that respect," was the almost angry retort of the scout.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE NEWS.

HORSESHOE NED was as proud as a peacock, when the stage from the East came in to the station and he saw that he was to have four distinguished passengers back to the fort with him.

Their arrival was wholly unexpected, for they had not been looked for yet for some weeks.

The four were Colonel Dunwoody and his bride, she that had been the sister of Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw, and known as Bonnie Belle, and Captain Caruth and his wife, *nee* Clarice Carr.

The colonel had been promoted to the rank of brigadier-general, to take effect upon his return to his post, where he had been ordered to go at once and make certain changes along the line of forts, which he was now to take command of, his valuable services having been properly rewarded by his promotion, at the time of his bridal visit to Washington.

Captain Caruth had also been raised to a majority, while Major Lester was to step into the rank of a lieutenant-colonel.

Thus had various promotions made many changes in Pioneer Post, and General Dunwoody was most anxious to get back and get matters set to rights in his command.

The decision was so suddenly made that he had not time to write to Lieutenant-Colonel De Sutro of his change of plans, and not having heard that the road-agents had again appeared upon the trails he had not supposed an escort would be necessary for the ride to the fort.

Arriving at the station he found that having taken a special coach he was twelve hours ahead of the starting time of Horseshoe Ned, whose coach having broken down on the outward run, by crushing a wheel, would still delay them for some little while.

Still the station was by no means uncomfortable to those who had been used to roughing it, and the party made themselves at home at the lone spot in the mountains.

The general and the major, with their brides, were warmly welcomed by Horseshoe Ned, who soon called the two gentlemen aside, and said:

"Yer hain't heard any news o' late from ther fort, has yer, general?" and Ned emphasized the title as though it was a pleasure to pronounce it.

"Not for weeks, Ned."

"Then yer don't think yer better send some one through to the fort for a escort?"

"Why so, Ned?"

"Waal yer see, general, and you, major, there has been trouble on ther trails ag'in."

"What kind of trouble, Ned?" asked General Dunwoody with some show of anxiety.

"Road-agents."

"Hal do you mean it?"

"I does, sir."

"When was this?"

"The last few weeks, sir."

"On your trail?"

"On my trail, sir, also on others."

"What others?"

"Red Coach Rob was held up, sir."

"Who else?"

"Four-in-hand Frank, sir."

"The road-agents seem to be on a circuit of the trails, then."

"Thar's only one, sir."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir."

"He must be a bold one, then?"

"He is, sir, for Colonel De Sutro sent Mustang Monte on a mission for him, sir, and the same man held him up, and yet he did not get the money the cowboy had."

"Where were the scouts, that a cowboy was sent?"

"At the fort, sir, but Colonel De Sutro preferred to send a cowboy."

The brow of General Dunwoody darkened, and he asked:

"Has no one any idea of who this road-agent is?"

"No, sir."

"You have seen him?"

"Yes, sir, but he is masked."

"Ah!"

"Yes, sir, he is a masked Mexican."

"Why do you think that he is a Mexican?"

"Well, sir, he held me up when I came on the run out with Miss De Sutro, for she was only able to leave a few days ago."

"Yes, I remember she was ill when we left."

"The masked Mexican held me up, and he was dressed to kill, spoke in broken English and were thet polite that he said he could not rob a lady, but were in hard luck, so was robbin coaches ter raise money ter pay his debts so he c'd live like a gent ag'in."

"He is an odd fellow to say the least."

"He's a queer one, general, from 'wayback."

"And he did not rob Miss De Sutro?"

"No, sir, he let her go by, and when she went on with Red Coach Rob he headed him off and again let her pass, but robbed two men passengers thet was along."

"He is courteous at least to ladies, Ned."

"He is, general, or was, for ther third time he met her were with Four-in-hand Frank and then he tuk a tumble in his good intentions and made Miss De Sutro pay toll, though I hears he did not git all the money she had."

"This looks serious, Caruth," and the general turned to the major.

"It does ind-ed, sir, for it is strange news that Horseshoe Ned brings us," was the answer.

CHAPTER XXX.

CAUGHT IN THE COIL.

THE two officers and their wives had not been the only passengers who had come in on the west-bound coach, for there had been a rough-looking individual with bushy hair and beard, and a miner's suit, who had his face bound up from a recent wound which would doubtless disfigure him, as the plaster covered one cheek and eye.

He had nothing to say, had ridden on the box with the driver and merely remarked in a hoarse whisper that he had been nearly "done up" by some desperadoes and could not talk.

Arriving at the station he had disappeared, and half an hour after was mounted upon a horse he had purchased, and was on his way, afoot, the animal carrying his traps, down to Pocket City, he said.

He had ridden up to the station while Horseshoe Ned was talking to the two officers, and waited until he got a jug filled with some liquor which the driver designated as "the extract of lightning."

If he heard what was being said he did not appear to take any heed of it, and when he got his jug, rode on his way down the Yellow Dust Valley trail.

"If that fellow is not a villain he belies his looks, Major Caruth," said General Dunwoody, as the man rode away.

"He does, indeed, sir," was the answer.

Soon after his departure the three resumed their conversation about the "Masked Mexican."

"Well, Ned," at last said the general, "I, for one, think that with you, the major and myself, we should be able to prevent this masked Mexican from robbing us."

"I hope so, sir."

"What do you say, Major Caruth?"

"I agree with you, general, though one man holding the advantage of a surprise can do wonders."

"Very true; but as there is only one man, who really may not be upon the trail, we can risk it I think."

"I agree with you, sir."

"If they were more than one, if he had a band, you know, why then I would say delay here and send for an escort, as we have our wives with us."

"But under the circumstances, let us risk it."

"So I say, sir."

"I think it is safe, general, for Buffalo Bill and some of those Merry Men of his have just passed over the trails where the masked Mexican have been seen, and that will make him lie low, I guesses."

"I trust so, Ned."

"Then you goes back with me, sir?"

"Yes, and we will have a number of trunks, for the ladies go back well laden with presents, and purchases they made in the East."

"The coach will hold 'em, and there will be no other passengers, so you will git along quite comfortable."

So it was arranged, and the coach of Horseshoe Ned, having been repaired, pulled out of the station some hours after the starting time, a circumstance which would cause night to overtake them upon the road, when they were yet miles away from the fort.

Not to alarm them, no mention had been made to the ladies of the doings of the masked Mexican.

The day wore away and when the sun set the coach was just twenty miles from the fort.

Horseshoe Ned had congratulated himself upon having passed the places where it was feared the road-agent might appear, and was chuckling that he would yet get through with a very valuable cargo, when, just as he drew near the summit of a hill there came a whirring sound and a lariat settled over his shoulders, pinioning his arms to his side, while stern rung the command:

"Put your foot on that brake and halt!"

The hill was steep and the leaders had not yet reached the summit.

There was a bluff on one side, the left, of the trail, rising above the top of the coach, and it was wooded.

From this bluff had the lasso been thrown, and it was drawn taut the moment it settled over the shoulders of the driver.

The moon shone as bright as day, and there was nothing for Horseshoe Ned to do but obey; so he put his foot upon the brake, as commanded, and brought his team to a halt.

Then there appeared across the ridge, relieved against the sky, yet half in the shadow, the forms of four horsemen.

This had taken but an instant, and out of each coach window had peered the faces of the officers.

"Ho, driver, are you held up?" came in the stern tones of the general, while Major Caruth added:

"Where is the enemy, Ned, for we will fight?"

At last came the pleading tones of the driver:

"Don't do it, general!"

"No, no, major, for there's plenty of 'em, as you kin see by lookin' up yonder ahead of us."

A glance showed the general and Captain Caruth the shadowy forms of four horsemen drawn across the trail, and at the same time a laugh came from the timber on the bluff, followed by the words in broken English:

"You are game enough, senors, I know; but you are at my mercy. But, better your gold than your lives, so don't make this a funeral scene."

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE TREASURE TRUNK.

THE situation was a trying one—a desperate one, in fact.

There sat Horseshoe Ned upon the box, a lasso drawn taut about his body, holding down his arms, and across the trail in his front were four horsemen as silent as specters.

The hill was a steep one, but just where the coach had halted was a gully which held the wheels, preventing the horses from going back.

There was no chance to turn about, to fly, or to drive on.

Within the coach were two of the bravest officers in the army.

But their hands were tied completely by the fact that they had all they loved most in the world with them.

Both officers would have fought to the death if alone, and Horseshoe Ned was as brave a man as lived.

But what could these men do, wholly at the mercy of five, at least, and doubtless more?

Mrs. Dunwoody had seen desperate sights in her life upon the border, and yet she was not one to see her husband take chances against such odds.

Clarice Caruth was cool and fearless also, yet why risk a precious life for gold, when gold was not their idol, or all that they had in the world?

"It's ther masked Mexican, general, and this time he hain't alone, but backed up by more of ther same sort, so go slow on yer shootin', as ther ladies might git hurt," called out Horseshoe Ned.

"That is good advice, senors, the ladies might get hurt, for my men will return any fire, so be warned," called out the outlaw.

"What is your wish, Sir Road-thief?" sternly asked the general, for both Clarice and Ruth had urged against resistance.

"I desire gold, senor."

"I will give you my purse."

"No, senor, I want more, for I am no common footpad, whom a few dollars will satisfy, but a Mexican gentleman in hard luck, seeking to pay my debts by collecting toll from my avowed enemies, the Americans."

At once General Dunwoody spoke to him in Spanish, and said:

"You play a bold game, Senor Mexican, and one which will bring you to the gallows."

The reply was in the same tongue, and in perfect Spanish.

"We have an old Mexican proverb, senor, which says, in giving a recipe for a rabbit stew, to first catch your rabbit, and to apply it differently, you Americans have it that it is catching before hanging."

"The fellow speaks perfect Spanish," said the general to those in the coach, while he called out to the outlaw, now in English:

"I do not care to bandy words with you, sir, so what is your demand?"

"I happen to know, senor, that you are returning from a bridal tour, along with a brother officer, and your brides, and back at the place where you took the coaches you put your combined treasures into one trunk, to the better carry them, and that is what I wish."

"The fellow has had a spy upon us," muttered the general, while aloud he said:

"You certainly have no use for the bridal gifts of ladies; so must spare them, while both Major Caruth and myself will pay to you what money we have."

"How much have you, senor?"

After a few words with Major Caruth, the general said:

"We have about two thousand dollars in money with us."

"I wish that money, and the trunk, as well."

"You are an infamous scoundrel to rob ladies as you do of their souvenirs and valuables."

"If the ladies care to redeem them they can do so at a future time, by paying me their value in gold, for I will look over the trunk and notify this driver of just what I will accept in gold in lieu of them."

"There is no help for it but to obey his bidding," Clarice said.

"And I say the same, general," Ruth added.

"Do you so advise, Caruth?"

"I see no other course, general, but to obey now and have our revenge at another day."

"It is hard to yield, yet I suppose it must be so," and calling out to the road-agent, the general continued:

"We have decided to yield to your demand, sir, as we can do nothing else."

"And you will give up the money and the trunk?"

"Yes."

"Two thousand dollars, you said?"

"About that."

"As you are a man of honor, I take your word for it; but I know the trunk."

"Well?"

"It is a black trunk, iron-bound, and bears upon each end the letters:

"O. D., U. S. A."

"You seem well informed, Sir Robber."

"I understand my business, sir."

"All right, come and get your money."

"Thank you, no."

"Do you expect me to bring it to you?"

"No, hand it up to the driver and let him tie it in the end of the lariat."

"Then I will cast it back to him, and he can tie it about the trunk, which I will haul up here."

"Why not send one of your men for it?"

"I will put none of my men in your power," was the reply of the outlaw.

CHAPTER XXXII.

THE ROAD AGENT'S MISTAKE.

As there seemed to be no alternative but to obey, the general took his own and Major Caruth's money, wrapped it in his handkerchief and handed it to Horseshoe Ned.

"Now release your arms, senor, and tie that money to the end of this lariat," called out the road-agent.

With oaths that were suppressed, out of respect to the two ladies, Horseshoe Ned obeyed, and the road-agent drew his money up to the bluff.

"Yes, this is all right."

"I was sure I was dealing with honorable gentlemen," he said.

Then he called out:

"Now, driver, dismount and take from the rear of the coach the trunk I want."

"I'll see you hanged first," was the emphatic rejoinder of the driver.

"Obey, or I will send a bullet through your brain," came the threatening words.

"See here, Thief of the Trail, I hain't got but one time ter die, and it will be this blessed minute, before I'll help you rob these two sweet ladies."

"But I tell you to do so, brave Ned, and Mrs. Caruth joins with me in the request," cried Ruth Dunwoody, alarmed lest the fearless man would be at once shot.

"I will keep my word and kill you if you do not," said the road-agent.

"Yes, Horseshoe Ned, obey, and get the trunk for this gentleman who is in such bad luck," the general remarked.

"All right, Dago, I'll do it, as the general tells me to do so."

"The black, iron-bound trunk, remember, with the letters upon each end in white:

"O. D., U. S. A."

"Are you sure that is the trunk you wish, sir?" asked the general.

"I am."

"Get the trunk the Mexican senor wishes, Ned," said General Dunwoody.

After some trouble Ned obeyed, attached the end of the lariat about it and mounted his box.

"Now wait until I give you the order to drive on," said the masked Mexican.

A minute after the statue-like horsemen wheeled away from across the trail at the top of the hill and disappeared in the timber.

Then the masked Mexican appeared upon horseback and called out:

"You can pass on now, driver."

Horseshoe Ned chirped to his horses and they pulled on up the hill, passing the masked Mexican seated upon his horse like a statue in the moonlight, not thirty feet from the coach.

He saw the faces of the four occupants gazing upon him from the coach window as they went by, and politely raised his gold-embroidered sombrero.

But in vain did the four, and Horseshoe Ned, endeavor to pierce the mask he wore and behold the face beneath.

The coach passed on over the ridge, and down the hill, leaving the road-agent seated upon his horse gazing after it, and apparently in no hurry

to examine the contents of the treasure-trunk he had so boldly captured.

But hardly had the last glimpse of the outlaw been seen when Mrs. Dunwoody said quickly:

"General, tell Horseshoe Ned to drive on with all speed, for the horses have had a rest and must be pushed to their utmost."

"But why, Ruth, now that all danger is passed?"

"Tell him first, and then I will give you my reasons," was the almost curt reply.

The general knew that his wife must have some good reason for her request, so he called out:

"Ned, drive with all the speed you can, getting all out of the horses possible, for it is urgent."

"I'll do it, general, and I think I know why," was Horseshoe Ned's answer, and the whip at once began to fall upon the horses and sent them along at a dangerously rapid pace for that trail.

As soon as the general had drawn his head back into the coach and resumed his seat, Ruth said:

"My reason is just this, that was not the treasure-trunk."

All exclaimed at this, and the general said:

"Why, Ruth, how can this be, when we pooled our issue, so to speak, and packed all our treasures in my old army trunk?"

"I know that we did, but I noticed that the weight had racked the trunk considerably, so at the station I had it sent to my room, along with my old strong box, and made the change, so that when the road-agent finds his mistake, he will pursue us with his band and perhaps want blood this time instead of gold."

Both the general and Major Caruth laughed at Ruth's words and manner, and the former said:

"Well, you have fooled the road-agent, that is certain, if you have gotten us into a scrape at the same time."

"It is the trunk he asked for," demurely said Ruth.

"And he get what he wanted," Clarice remarked, while Major Caruth said:

"I'll whisper the truth into the ear of Horseshoe Ned and got up with him to help work the combination."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE MOONLIGHT FLIGHT.

WITHOUT halting the coach, Major Caruth, who was an athlete, swung himself from the stage door up to the box by the side of Horseshoe Ned.

"Come, Ned, we must do better than this, and I have come to help you, so I'll handle the whip while you manipulate the ribbons," said the major.

"All right, sir, and I guesses I know why."

"Why then, Ned?"

"That was the wrong trunk?"

"It was."

"I thought so, sir, when I took it from the baggage rack, as it were so light."

"You are right, Ned, for the treasure-trunk was so heavy that it had burst with its weight, and Mrs. Dunwoody repacked it, using one of her own for the valuables, and which, she says, had little of real value in it except books which she had brought along, and which can be replaced for little cost."

"Lord have marcy, sir, but ther masked Mexican will cuss in three languages when he finds it out."

"I would not be surprised."

"Is ther a Bible among ther books, sir?"

"I really do not know; but I will ask?"

"Never mind, sir, only if there is, maybe it will convert him."

"It is to be hoped so, Ned," and the major let the leaders feel the lash, touching them up with the skill of a master of the whip.

The road was comparatively good now, and the team of six horses, as Ned said, "got down to business."

"We have a place ahead, sir, where we have to slow up for half a mile, and then we can make 'em jump for half a dozen miles straight ahead," Ned said, and he cast an anxious look far back in the moonlight.

But no persons were visible, yet the speed of the horses was not relaxed, for both the driver and the officer well knew that the road-agents, well mounted, and they doubtless were, could travel three miles to one of the coach.

At last, as they drew up for the bad piece of road, Major Caruth's quick eye caught sight of a dark object coming out of the timber a mile away.

"There they come, Ned, so push all you can."

"I will, sir, though its go slow here or break down."

"So it seems, and you are doing your best."

"Are they coming, major?" quietly asked the general from the coach window.

"Yes, sir."

"Then we must fight them off if we can."

"Yes, sir."

"The ladies will be protected from their shots by the baggage in the rack, and I will come on top and help you."

"If you please, sir."

"And you must be protected there," said Ruth, firmly.

"There is some baggage on top, you know, Ruth."

"Yes, and here are three heavy cushions and our wraps, and they will help, for we will be more than safe here," remarked Ruth, and she was perfectly calm.

"We will all be safe, never fear," was the cheery answer of the general, and he swung out of the window and was the next instant upon the top of the coach.

"Now, Caruth, we must make a breastwork of this luggage, for it will protect Ned and ourselves as well.

"If we could only get into our trunks, we would have no fear, for our new rifles are there."

"Yes, sir, but the trunks containing the rifles are on the rack in the rear."

"Well, we can use our revolvers, and if the road-agents have rifles, we must take it as it comes."

"Yes, sir," and Major Caruth took up the cushions, wraps and valises handed up by Ruth and Clarice, and placing them, with the baggage, in position, formed a very respectable breastwork across the top of the coach.

They were now going through heavy timber, and where the trail was very rough; but soon it became good traveling again, and the coach ceased to bound and rock as before, though the horses were sent forward at a more rapid pace.

The timber still continued heavy, shading the moonlight so that the trail was darkened, and they could not see far back behind; but, when drawing rein for a moment to listen, the sound of hoofs was heard coming rapidly on.

"They is mad clean through, sir," said Horseshoe Ned, addressing the general, who was upon his right, standing with his face to the rear, while Major Caruth was upon the left.

"Yes, and they will be merciless, so we must fight it out to the end," was the stern reply.

The woods now became thicker, the darkness greater, and all knew that the pursuers could not be far behind.

Ahead was a steep hill, and suddenly Ruth called out:

"Quick! take my keys and get me my cornet out of the little red trunk on top."

The general hastily obeyed, and a moment after, as the sound of approaching hoofs drew nearer, when the bottom of the hill was reached, there suddenly rung out the clear bugle-notes of a rally of cavalry.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE BUGLE-CALL.

THE clear notes of Ruth's silver cornet, blowing a cavalry bugle-call rung through the timber with thrilling reverberations, and were echoed back from the steep hillside.

The stage-horses seemed cheered by the ringing notes, and General Dunwoody and Major Caruth could hardly repress a cheer, while Horseshoe Ned, with less dignity upon his broad shoulders, burst forth in a wild war-whoop.

The cry was contagious and the two officers gave vent to a cheer which was joined in by the clear, musical voices of Ruth and Clarice.

Then again arose the cornet sounding the bugle notes of a charge, and the cheers were repeated.

"Hold, Ned!"

At the command of the general, Horseshoe Ned drew rein upon the side of the steep hill.

He had hardly done so when he shouted:

"They is a-go'in' back!"

"Yer sent 'em back a-whoopin', miss, with that bugle-call!"

All listened and they could hear the rattle of hoofs in rapid flight and dying away in the distance.

"Ruth, my brave girl, your nerve has saved us," the general said enthusiastically.

"It did indeed, Mrs. Dunwoody, and it was just like you to think of it," the major added.

"She spoke of it, but at first feared her cornet was in one of the trunks in the rack," added Clarice Carr.

"It struck me that if the outlaws thought we were meeting a party of cavalry they would take to their heels, and fortunately I was right," was Ruth's response to the praise heaped upon her, and which was topped off with Ned's laudation of:

"Yer is a dandy from 'Wayback, miss, and what you says and does goes."

"I'm yer sarvant, miss, fer life, as I'd hev been ther fust one kilt by them outlaws, I feels sart'in."

As the danger was now considered over, the horses were allowed to go at a slower pace, though still pushed above ordinary speed, as the general was anxious to send Buffalo Bill and his men to the scene, that they might be on hand to start upon the trail at the first peep of dawn, and see if the road-agents could not be run to earth.

The coach, as it was, having been delayed by repairs, was hours behind, and when within a few miles of the fort a party of cavalry was met coming out to see what the reason of the delay was.

They greeted their commander with a cheer, when they heard he was with the coach, and the lieutenant in charge slyly dispatched a courier back at full speed to notify the post that Colonel

Dunwoody and his bride, accompanied by Captain and Mrs. Caruth, were coming on the coach, for the young officer did not know of the promotion of his two superiors.

The coach came in view of the fort two hours before midnight, and was at once greeted by the roar of artillery, to the great surprise of the passengers, who did not know of the lieutenant's sly act of sending word on ahead.

The greeting to the commander was most sincere from all, except from Lieutenant-Colonel DeSutro, who deeply regretted having to give up his temporary honors.

He was too politic to betray this feeling, however, and both he and his wife, outwardly, welcomed the general and his wife, and Major Caruth and Clarice, for the shoulder-straps of their fatigue suits now showed that they had been promoted.

But General Dunwoody lost no time in sending for Buffalo Bill, and after a short talk with his chief, the scout and his men dashed rapidly away, and accompanying them was Surgeon Powell, who could never miss a chance to go on a trail when there was a prospect of a fight at the end of it, or good service to be rendered as scout, fighter or surgeon.

The scouts went prepared for a fight, or a long trail, and rode rapidly to the scene where the bugle-calls of Ruth had caused the pursuers of the coach to turn back.

Here they went into camp until morning, as no trail could be followed through the timber by night.

But when the day had dawned so that they could see the tracks they were mounted and ready to follow the trail.

They readily saw where the coach had halted upon the hillside, and following it back they could see that up to that point Horseshoe Ned was driving at the full speed of his horses.

Several hundred yards back the keen eyes of Buffalo Bill fell upon something that riveted his attention.

"Here, Frank, see!"

"Yes, a horseman reined up suddenly there and wheeled to the right-about."

"Yes, when his rider heard the bugle-call! He was the leader, doubtless."

And this trail they followed back, but not an eye could find another track or trace, and at last Buffalo Bill said, after several miles had been gone over:

"There was but one man pursuing the coach, men."

And his Merry Men agreed with him.

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE SCOUTS' DISCOVERY.

THERE was no doubt but that the scouts all felt the same way, as to the number of road-agents who had followed the coach.

They were all experienced trailers, and there were besides the chief and Surgeon Powell, Wild Bill, Texas Jack and others of that ilk, so there could be no mistake.

They picked out the tracks of the six running coach-horses, and following was the one track of the pursuer.

The rider had cut across here and there where the coach had to go around, and all along the separate tracks of the single horse were picked out from those made by the team, by the skillful experts in prairie craft.

Back to the scene of the halting of the coach went the scouts on the trail, and then they scattered to pick up the threads as each man could.

Buffalo Bill and the Surgeon Scout kept side by side.

Every man had left his horse, not to confuse the tracks, and so there were visible the trails of the four horses which had ridden across the road in the face of the coach team.

There, too, was the single trail which the scouts had followed back to the scene of the hold-up.

Where the coach had halted while the robbery took place was seen, and there was the trunk broken open, the contents scattered about, just as they had been thrown by the searchers for gold.

These things were gathered up and repacked in the trunk, while Buffalo Bill and his Merry Men laughed over the fact of how the road-agents had been fooled.

From there the trail was taken on back over the stage trail, and there were five horses to trail, now, the one that had followed the coach, and the four that had ridden across the road ahead of the leaders.

A few miles from the scene of the robbery Buffalo Bill came upon a strange scene.

There in a valley a horse was feeding, and upon his back was a rider.

The latter did not appear to observe the scouts, but leant over in his saddle as though fast asleep.

Was he a picket neglecting his duty, while his comrades were encamped near and depending upon him?

This was the general opinion, and the Merry Men at once spread out in a circle to surround the mounted sentinel.

When the circle was complete they closed

rapidly in and dashed down upon the horseman.

A general laugh broke out from the Merry Men; and no wonder—the horseman was a dummy.

There was the horse, saddled and bridled, and there was a suit of clothes, a hat and the semblance of a man.

Even by daylight it was deceptive in appearance.

About the neck of the horse was a broken rope, and Buffalo Bill seemed to read the signs like an open book, for he said:

"This explains the situation, Surgeon Powell."

"Yes, if you read it as I do, Bill."

"I read it that there was but one man in the attack on the coach, and the four supposed men were dummies."

"That is just it."

"The one man was the masked Mexican, and he planned the attack by getting up those dummies, and he plotted well."

"He did indeed."

"When he discovered how he had been cheated out of his treasure, he became revengeful and rode after the coach in a mood that was dangerous."

"But he would have run against a snag in the two defenders the coach had."

"Oh yes, and was frightened off fortunately by Mrs. Dunwoody's bugle-call."

"Well, now to go on and see where the trail leads."

So on they rode, carrying with them the horse which carried the dummy outlaw, and which was taken as it was.

The trail led them for miles until it came to the relay stage-station, where they found the stock-tender at the corral having a look at his horses.

He recognized Buffalo Bill and his men as they rode up and called out:

"I say, Bill, has you been borrowin' any o' my critters?"

"No, Barney, but we have brought you one, perhaps. Is this your horse?"

"He be, fer a fact, but what in thunder is thet on him?"

"A road-agent."

"Yer don't mean it?"

"Waal, I has three others thet I found outside the corral this morning, a-lookin' as though ther witches hed been ridin' of 'em, and they was all tied together."

"Was there a broken rope at one end, Barney?"

"There was, Bill, for here is ther rope."

"It fits the one on this horse, and he broke loose and got lost in the night, and was hard to catch, so was left by the road-agent."

"Now, Surgeon Powell, we must find the trail of the man who played the bold game he did to rob the general and his party."

"Yes, Bill, but I fear we will lose that trail right here," was Surgeon Powell's answer.

And the surgeon was right, for from there the trail of the road-agent's horse could not be followed.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

AN APPEAL FOR AID.

AFTER three days of fruitless search the scouts returned to the fort in a very disconsolate mood.

They were no longer the Merry Men as they were called, always with a joke and laughter upon their lips, but instead were subdued by their failure to find the masked Mexican, or some clew to him.

The trunk with its contents, which the road-agent had seemed not to care for, had been strapped upon a pack-saddle and carried back to the fort, where it was said to be almost intact by Ruth Dunwoody.

The chief of scouts accompanied by Surgeon Powell went at once to the headquarters of the general, who had been most busy since his return in arranging matters to his liking.

Lieutenant-Colonel DeSutro sulked a little when he found that Lionel Lester had been promoted along with others, and that he had to go back from commandant of the post to his regiment once more, or rather the four companies of it stationed at the fort.

"Well, Cody, what luck?" eagerly asked the general, greeting the surgeon and the scout most cordially.

"None, sir, to speak of, as, though we brought back the trunk, with its contents safe I hope, we did not catch the robber."

"Nor find any clew to him or his gang?"

"We found his gang, sir."

"Ah, that is something indeed, for I suppose you captured or killed them?"

"We brought one back with us, sir, as a sample, and the others are not dangerous."

"In fact, general, there was only the masked Mexican to rob you that night, and who gave pursuit, for his men were dummies, mounted upon horses stolen from Barney's relay stage-station."

"Cody, you astound me!" and the face of the general fully depicted his amazement.

"We were also astounded, sir."

"And one man robbed us as he did?"

"True, sir, but one man; but he did it most cleverly!"

"Orderly!"

The orderly quickly came at the general's earnest call.

"My compliments to Major Caruth, and ask him to come to my quarters at once."

When the orderly disappeared, the general said, with a laugh:

"Caruth must also hear this mortifying story of how one man robbed two officers and Horseshoe Ned."

"I do not think, general, you should feel any self-censure about it, sir, for you certainly beheld a show of force, the ruse was so clever you could not believe but one man could do what the robber accomplished, and then, too, you had ladies with you, which forbade any resistance, which might bring a deadly fire upon them."

"It is most kind of you, Surgeon Powell, to help us out so nicely as you do, but I still feel deeply cut—ah! here is Caruth."

The major entered just then, saluting his superior and greeting the surgeon and the scout.

"Major Caruth, when we were robbed the other night how many outlaws did you see?"

"Five, sir."

"You are sure of this?"

"Perfectly, sir."

"You are willing to swear that you saw five men?"

"I am, sir."

"I must have Horseshoe Ned's testimony too," and the orderly was sent after the driver.

Horseshoe Ned soon put in an appearance, and the general asked:

"Horseshoe Ned, how many men did you see in the attack on the coach the other night?"

"Five, sir."

"You are certain?"

"Dead sart'in, sir, ther' were five of ther varmints, ther masked Mexican and the four who headed us off."

"You will take oath that you saw five men?"

"On a stack o' Bibles, sir, thet will fill my coach."

"Major Caruth, both you and Horseshoe Ned are wrong."

"I do not understand, general," said the major.

"Cody, pray explain just what we saw."

Buffalo Bill did so, and in spite of the presence of the general, Horseshoe Ned uttered an oath and then burst into a fit of hearty laughter.

"General, we was roasted, wasn't we?"

"Yes, Ned, we certainly were, and I agree with you that it is a laughing matter now though it was not then."

"Pardon me, general, but I were so sart'in I seen men, thet I fairly saw 'em raise and lower ther' weepers, and even heerd 'em talkin' as we druv by; but I guesses Buffalo Bill knows, and they was dummies, so we was sold; but next time I sees 'em, them dumb riders has got ter shoot me afore I believes they is flesh and blood."

All joined in the laugh now, for the general seemed really to enjoy it and said:

"It is lucky we got our promotion before this happened, Caruth, or we would never have gone up a round of the ladder."

"I fear not, sir."

Before more could be said the orderly entered with a note.

"A courier brought it, sir."

The general opened it and read aloud:

"Please send Buffalo Bill and his Merry Men to Pocket City, for there is work here for them to do."

"With respect,

"SCOTT KING,

"Captain of the Vigilantes."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

WAKING UP THE PASSENGERS.

FOUR-IN-HAND FRANK had been considerably worried over having Nina De Sutro robbed while under his charge.

He felt humiliated, and only hoped to get a chance when he would be able to enjoy a revenge by seeing the robber caught and hanged.

As the road-agent had never struck yet twice in the same place, and had made a good haul from Nina De Sutro, it was not supposed that Four-in-hand Frank's coach would be molested upon its run out, and hence Judge Scott King, and others, took advantage of what they supposed would be a safe trip, to send out certain money they wished deposited in eastern banks, or its equivalent in gold-dust.

The judge sent five thousand dollars in bills, to be deposited to his credit in Chicago, and there were various other sums amounting from five hundred to a couple of thousand in gold pieces, gold in its crude state or bank-bills.

"I've got a good load of treasure this time, judge."

"All of twelve thousand dollars," said the driver as he was about to depart upon his run.

"I think you will have no trouble, Frank, for no one knows the money is going through, and its presence in the hiding-place you have for it not a soul would ever suspect," the judge replied.

"That's so, sir, it's hid fer keeps," and mounting his box, Four-in-hand Frank drove away

from The Frying Pan Hotel with his usual jaunty air and dash, sending his team along at a slapping pace that looked as though it was the scheduled time of the Overland Company, but which dropped from fifteen to four miles an hour the moment the camps were left behind.

There were two miners along, giving up the mines and returning to their homes, for they had dug what was to them a fortune, and had sent it home, too, excepting what they had along with them.

They lolled back in the coach, taking their comfort and enjoying their pipes, while they mentally congratulated themselves upon having gotten out of the mines alive, and that after years of absence they were to greet the loved ones at home.

The way was nearly gone over, and Four-in-hand Frank was congratulating himself upon having gotten through in safety, when suddenly in the trail appeared the statue-like forms of a horse and rider.

"The masked Mexican, as I lives," said Frank, and his heart sunk within him.

But then he cheered up at the thought that the treasure was too well hidden to be found.

"Say, pard, he's onter us, so look spry, but don't be fools," called out Frank.

But no reply came from within the coach.

The two miners had brought along as "refreshments" a bottle each of some of the Devil's Den "best," and they had proceeded to surround the liquor with all dispatch.

The result was that they were both very drunk.

The masked Mexican did not have to halt Four-in-hand Frank, for the driver was willing to be accommodating.

He did not know whether there were more, or not, and he did know that he was liable to sudden death if he attempted to push by.

Did he receive encouragement from the two passengers, Frank was willing to fight.

But they were serenely oblivious to all danger. Frank's wounded finger pained him too, and it would not be an easy matter to handle the reins and his revolver together.

So, under the circumstances, he came to a halt and sung out:

"Waal, Pard Road-agent, this hain't your day ter win."

"How so?" asked the masked Mexican.

"I hain't got no yaller ballast aboard this cruise o' ther old mountain ship."

"You have passengers?"

"Who said so?"

"You did not, but I say so."

"Two miners as is dead bu'sted and is gittin' out o' ther mines."

"Tell them to get out."

"Pard, if they had not been asleep I'd 'a' tried it on with them ter run by you; but I c'u'dn't wake 'em up."

"Maybe I can."

Then raising his voice the road-agent called in his broken English:

"Ho there! Ho!"

But all calls were in vain.

The two miners slumbered on serenely.

"Perhaps this will be more effective," and the masked Mexican drew a revolver with his left hand, keeping his right hand weapon still covering the driver.

Riding to one side of the coach he pulled trigger and a bullet went crashing into the panels.

"Hold on, pard, don't cut ther old hearse ter pieces," called out the driver in alarm.

"I am only waking up those sleepy passengers," was the cool reply, and the other five shots of the revolver were sent tearing through the coach, causing the two passengers to throw open the door and with wild yells of terror to spring out before the road-agent.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

A ROAD-AGENT WHO KNOWS HIS BUSINESS.

THE muddled brains of the two passengers cleared very rapidly under the heroic waking-up treatment they had received at the hands of the outlaw.

Four-in-hand Frank knew a good thing when he saw it, and he laughed heartily, as he called out:

"Pard Thief, the judge oughter hev you at The Frying Pan ter wake up his lazy boarders."

The masked face of the Mexican could not be seen, so it was not known what effect the sudden tumbling out of the miners had upon him.

That the two men were terribly scared there was no room for doubt.

Nor was that all, for they had both been clipped by the bullets, one in the shoulder very slightly, the other on the leg, and though neither wound was at all serious, it had caused them pain and sobered them.

"I called you, senors, for I want you," said the masked Mexican, covering them with his revolver.

"And I calls you, pard, and wants yer," yelled Four-in-hand Frank, who had been watching his chance and acted the moment he saw that it had come.

As the words left his lips he whipped out his revolver and opened upon the masked Mexican.

Seeing the situation of affairs, and noting

the bold act of Frank, the two miners drew their revolvers and also began to fire.

The effect was startling, but not upon the masked Mexican.

He had merely turned his head toward Frank, as he began to fire, and then back again to face the two miners when they opened upon him.

There were all of a dozen shots turned upon the outlaw, and neither horse or rider moved.

"When you have done practicing, senors, I will talk with you," he said in the coolest manner possible, and returning his empty revolver to his holster in the saddle, for he had emptied it into the coach, he drew a second weapon from his belt.

Four-in-hand Frank was dumfounded and put up his gun, giving a whistle as he did so.

The miners stood awed and replaced their weapons.

Who was this man they had fired upon and who had never flinched, under it, or apparently been touched by a bullet?

Frank knew his own deadly aim, and he was aware that the two miners had the name of being good shots.

But there sat the Mexican, in proof that they had fired a dozen shots upon him with no apparent effect.

The situation was a strange one, and the driver and the miners were really awed.

"You are bad shots, senors, most wretched; but I warn you that my aim is deadly—see your whip, senor," and with a quick shot the staff of the whip was cut in two.

"Durn yer," growled Frank, while the masked Mexican continued:

"Now don't make me kill you, so obey."

There was no doubt but that he had the two miners cowed, while the driver was in a quandary, and suddenly took the chances of another shot.

It failed, and the Mexican laughed, while he said:

"I do not dread your bullets, for I was not born to die by the hand of man."

"Yer was born ter die jolly, dancin' a jig at ther end o' a rope," growled Frank, now apparently also afraid of the masked Mexican.

"I want no more nonsense now."

"You have given me your lead most freely, and now I want your gold."

"Come, senors, I want all the gold you have except what you need to get you home."

"We hain't got much."

"Perhaps it will be better to search your dead bodies."

The miners took the hint and unloaded.

They took off their buckskin belts, and the road-agent said:

"Count out for yourselves two hundred dollars, and give me the balance."

There was nothing to do but obey, and the belts of money were tossed up to the road-agent, who said graciously:

"Thanks, senors."

"Now, Senor Frank, it is your turn to be generous."

"I hain't no fool to carry money with me for road-agents."

"Very true; but you have a large sum hidden away."

"Ef yer kin find any dust about me or my old hearse yer is welcome, darn yer, ter have it."

"Thanks for your generous gift, senor."

"You, senor, get under that coach and you will find tacked close up to the bottom a piece of buckskin."

"Pull it off and hand me the money you find there!"

"Is you the devil?" gasped Frank, startled at the discovery of a secret which he believed known only to the judge and himself.

"Call me what you please, senor," was the indifferent reply, and when the miner, ordered to get the treasure, handed it to him, he turned and rode away, followed by a rattling fire from the driver and the miners, but which did not cause him even to turn in his saddle to look back at them.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

LIKE A HOODOO.

"I FIRED just twelve shots at him, pards," said Four-in-hand Frank, looking at his empty revolvers.

"Me too."

"Ditto me," were the responses of the miners.

"Thirty-six bullets at close range, and he rode off with a thank you, and something like twelve thousand dollars in money."

"Yas, five hundred o' my cash."

"Three hundred o' mine."

"Waal, I really believes he is the devil."

"It looks so."

"He is bullet proof, as he said."

"Was there bullets in our guns, does yer reckon?"

This question of Four-in-hand Frank, set the three to thinking.

"Let me see, I loaded my weapons yesterday afternoon, or more likely I didn't, but thet gunsmith at ther camps did, fer I give them to him ter overlook every month, and he puts 'em in prime condition fer me."

"Yes, and he fixed up our guns fer us, too, and loaded 'em."

"Then he left out the bullets," emphatically said Frank.

"No, fer I seen ther bullets in mine."

"Me too."

"So I does remember seein' 'em in mine too."

"Pards, I don't git ther hang o' this trick he hev played onter us."

The three men discussed the situation as they rode along, the miners riding upon the box now, and feeling deep regret that their bottles had been emptied, for they had been sobered up too suddenly for their own good.

They had sought for their ammunition to reload their revolvers, and taking out the powder and bullets soon had their revolvers in condition again, though Frank said:

"We has nothing to defend now but our lives."

They had gone but a few miles when they were suddenly brought to a halt, by a sharp command:

"Hold! Hands up!"

The voice came from a thicket, and though they did not see the man who halted them, they, as if with one thought, drew their weapons and pulled trigger, aiming into the covert.

But it was but a volley of caps, for not a single shot was fired, and every revolver was given its full complement in trial.

The effect can be imagined upon the driver and the two miners.

They had hoped to slaughter the man who had dared hold them up, be he who he might.

Then, out from among the foliage-fringed rocks rode a horseman, his revolvers in his hands, and covering the driver and his two passengers.

"The masked Mexican again, or I lies!" cried Frank, and the horseman heard his words.

They looked in dumb amazement at him, while he called out:

"I want my toll, senors, and shall charge high after your attempt to kill me."

"Your powder must be bad."

"Hain't yer satisfied with what yer robbed us of back on ther trail, that yer cuts ahead of us ag'in?" demanded Four-in-hand Frank.

The man regarded him fixedly through the eye-holes in his mask, and then said slowly:

"Did I take all?"

"Waal, yer was man enough ter let my pards here keep a couple of hundred each, and now I suppose yer wants that?"

"I do."

"Hand over every dollar you have, senors, or I shall give lead for gold."

The two miners took off their depleted belts and tossed them to the masked Mexican, who said:

"I must be content with this."

"Let me see, it was just what distance from here back on the trail that I halted you?"

"Not five miles back, as yer should know, darn yer, seein' as yer is akin to ther devil."

The road-agent bowed and turned away in silence, while the three men looked at each other in a bewildered way.

The driver took his revolvers and looked at them.

Then he took out his powder-pouch, poured a little upon the top of the coach, and lighting a match, touched it to it.

There was no flash. Putting some in his mouth, Four-in-hand Frank cried savagely:

"It's black sand, or he has hoodoo'd ther powder."

The powder of the miners proved to be of the same kind; and utterly helpless as far as their weapons went, the three men went on their way sadder and wiser.

"We has ter go back with yer, Pard Frank, ter work some time longer ter git ther dust ter git home," said one.

"Sure," said the other.

"Yas, pards, I takes yer back at my expense, free, for I wants yer as witnesses in my case," sadly said Frank.

In the meanwhile the masked Mexican had ridden back along the trail until he came to the scene of the first hold-up.

He dismounted from his horse, looked the ground over carefully, and then leaping into his saddle, rode rapidly away.

CHAPTER XL.

THE PAYMASTER.

RED COACH ROB was driving slowly along a dangerous part of his trail, which wound around a steep bluff.

The trail was narrow, a precipice being upon the other side, but a few feet from the wheel-tracks, and to go over it meant certain death.

This the driver and the horses as well knew, and the greatest caution was taken.

*Cartridges were not in general use then, but powder, ball and caps.—THE AUTHOR.

It was upon the return trip of the driver, when he made it by daylight, his down run being made always by night.

The bluff upon his right hand rose a few feet above the coach-top and was covered with a growth of stunted trees.

Red Coach Rob had his reins well in hand, his eyes upon his horses, and was thinking of no danger there other than that of the drive around the bluff.

He had a passenger with him, and who was looking out of the coach window regarding the danger of the trail with considerable interest, and the skill of the driver.

Suddenly, from over the edge of the bluff, floated a dark object, settling quickly over the shoulders of the driver, and coming taut with a twang, a lasso had Red Coach Rob in its fatal coil.

At the same instant the command was heard:

"Halt!"

The foot of Red Coach Rob was upon his brake, his hands tightly clasping the reins, and there was nothing for him to do but obey.

His arms were pinioned to the elbow with the lasso, which had been most skillfully thrown, and a mistake then meant destruction to human life, his team and coach.

The passenger inside the coach looked out to try and divine the cause of the halt, for he had not understood the command and supposed that it was the driver who had spoken.

"Senor, we have met before and you are covered, so do not throw your life away," came from over the bluff.

"I understand my position, and the danger we are all in."

"This is a bad place to delay a team, so talk quick before my horses get restless," said the driver.

"You have a United States paymaster along as a passenger?"

"I have a passenger, but I do not know who he is."

"He is Paymaster Fellows, and he carries in his valise a large sum of money, which I want."

"Well, you and him for that," was Red Coach Rob's indifferent response.

The passenger had heard all, and now called out:

"I am not Paymaster Fellows."

"He was taken ill and could not come, so sent me to report his illness to the commander at the fort."

"Does that mean that you have no Government money with you?" asked the road-agent.

"Of course it does, for Major Fellows would not trust a clerk to take his money."

"What amount have you?"

"Perhaps a couple of hundred dollars."

"I shall take chances of finding more, so throw out that valise!"

The order rung out threateningly, and as there was a moment's hesitation the road-agent sent a bullet crashing through the coach.

"Quick! no delay, or you get the next bullet."

The man saw that the road-agent meant just what he said, and he tossed a black valise out of the window, for the horses were getting very restless, and Red Coach Rob called out:

"Don't dally now, pard, unless you want us all to go over the precipice."

"There is my valise," the passenger said, "and all the Government money you find in it you are welcome to."

"Drive on!" shouted the masked Mexican, leveling his revolver at Red Coach Rob, who now threw off the noose and obeyed.

And not an instant too soon, for fretted at the delay, and startled by the shot, the horses had become so restive that they were getting beyond control.

They were held well in hand, however, by Red Coach Rob, as they started forward, and they soon passed out of the peril of the bluff trail, and were drawn up to give the driver a rest after his hard exertions.

The passenger took advantage of this halt to get out and clamber up to the box, while he said:

"That was a close call, driver."

"Yes, sir, and it was lucky you were not Major Fellows and had no Government funds with you, for he would have gotten it."

"I am not Major Fellows, driver, but I

am Captain Fleming, who was sent to relieve the major, who is ill at the southwest post.

"That fellow was posted in some way that Major Fellows was going through with funds for the quartermaster and commissary at Pioneer Post, and he came very near getting just twenty thousand dollars from me."

Red Coach Rob gave a shrill whistle of surprise while he said:

"You were in luck, sir."

"Yes."

"But he got your valise."

"That was a valise I had the one now in the coach in."

"I took out the inner one, and threw him the outer one," and both laughed over the clever ruse of the officer.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE RUSE THAT WENT WRONG.

THE paymaster rose greatly in the estimation of Red Coach Rob, by his clever ruse.

He had shown the coolest courage and presence of mind, saving a large sum to the Government, and Red Coach Rob respected pluck and liked the officer.

Presently he said:

"It will not do to jog along at this pace, for when that masked Mexican discovers how he has been sold he will come after us."

"Doubtless, and will find me ready to meet him, if he has not too great odds against me."

"We'll trust to the speed of my team first, sir, for a stern chase is said to be a long one, and, unless he cuts us off we can distance him I hope, while, if it comes to a fight, we must meet him more than half-way."

"You think he is alone then?"

"Yes, sir, for the masked Mexican never has aid, and almost invariably catches his victims off their guard or at such a disadvantage resistance would be utter madness."

"Can he cut us off anywhere?"

"If he knows the trail well he can, sir."

"Where?"

"About ten miles ahead, sir, for he can cut through Split Canyon, going four miles while we travel three times that distance."

"Then we must be on the watch."

"You will have to be, sir, for it is the worst place on the road and I'll have all I can do to steer my team down the hill in safety."

"All right, you look to your horses then, and I'll see to this masked Mexican if he heads us off," said the officer.

There was no sign of a pursuit being made by the disappointed road-agent, and the stage rolled on until it came to the dangerous piece of road spoken of by Red Coach Rob.

There the driver had to devote all of his energies to his team, and interested in watching his skill and nerve in driving, Captain Fleming forgot the very existence of the road-agent until suddenly brought to a realization of danger by the team coming to a sudden halt as there appeared in the trail ahead of the leaders the masked Mexican upon horseback.

"Hold!"

"Hands off that weapon or you are a dead man—what! you dare me?"

"Take that!"

Just as the officer had drawn his revolver to fire the masked Mexican pulled trigger.

Back upon the coach-top sunk the officer, his right arm shattered by the bullet from the road-agent's pistol, forcing him to cling on with his other hand or be thrown from the coach, which, in spite of every effort now of Red Coach Rob, was being dragged on down the steep and terrible hill by the team.

Red Coach Rob had his hands full in managing his team, so called out:

"Hold for your life, sir, or you will be hurled to the rocks."

"Coward! don't you see I cannot check my team up here?"

The last was addressed to the masked Mexican who had wheeled alongside the coach, and riding by it as it went down the hill, answered:

"Oh, yes, I see your trouble, senor; but any trick will cost you your life, so beware."

Then as the coach reached the bottom of the hill the road-agent called out:

"Halt!"

"Hands up both of you!"

There was nothing to do but obey, the officer raising his unwounded arm above his head, as Red Coach Rob raised his, while he said:

"You are very smart, Sir Mexican, to catch me as you did just now back upon the Shelf trail, when I could not do anything, and then cut through Split Canyon, when you found there was nothing in the valise the gentlemen threw to you, and catch me here where you got me foul again."

"Now what do you expect to get this time?"

"Money."

The masked Mexican had listened with seemingly deepest interest to what the driver had said, and his answer was short and to the point.

As neither Red Coach Rob nor the officer made any reply he continued:

"Yes, I want money, and, as that gentleman appears to be dangerously wounded, I advise that you do not delay long in giving me my toll, but get the senor to the station as soon as possible."

"I have no gold to give you, and this gentleman I warn you not to rob, as he is an army officer."

"Ah! and what care I who a man is?"

"Come, give up your money, senor, or I will finish my work!"

"You cannot resist, sir, for you are wounded and have done all in your power to prevent being robbed," said Red Coach Rob.

"The sachel is in the coach."

"Take it," said the officer faintly.

"No, I am not to be caught in such a trap, senor," said the masked Mexican, observing a certain flash in the eyes of Captain Fleming.

"If I put my head in the coach, you would be dangerous that very instant, wounded though you are."

"Come, driver, the senor is unable to ride upon the box, aid him into the coach and hand me out the valise."

"Obey, for I am in an ugly humor."

Red Coach Rob saw that the officer was growing weaker from loss of blood, and also that the road-agent meant to carry out his threat, and was not to be trifled with, so he at once said:

"Let me help you down, sir, and I will do what I can to dress your wound, and then push on with all speed, for the station-agent is a doctor, I am glad to tell you."

"Thank you."

"I suppose the loss of the money is inevitable, so let it go," and the wounded officer was aided to the ground by Red Coach Rob, both of them covered the while by the road-agent.

Then the valise was handed to the masked Mexican, who slowly backed his horse out of range, covering the two all the while.

He stood out of range watching them, while Red Coach Rob bound up the wounded arm as well as he could and aided the officer into the coach.

Then mounting to his box he drove rapidly on, while the road-agent gave a shout of delight as he opened the sachel and discovered the packs of new money it contained.

Strapping it to his saddle he rode rapidly away through Split Canyon to the cliff trail, and there found the outer sachel which had been thrown from the coach.

It was crushed, as though trampled upon, and after examining it, and the surroundings for awhile, the masked Mexican rode away to his lair, wherever that was.

CHAPTER XLII.

THE TREASURE-BOX.

THE wounded officer was as well cared for at the station, as it was possible for him to be, and Red Coach Rob ran through with all the speed he could make.

Fortunately he was in good time for the coach of Horseshoe Ned, and Captain Fleming took it to the fort the next morning.

From Horseshoe Ned he learned of the attack upon his coach on his last run, and that no less a personage was robbed by the masked Mexican than General Dunwoody.

"Buffalo Bill and his Merry Men, as we call them scouts at the fort, sir, is after the road-agent, or leastwise was, and so he's as good as captured, only it will take some

little time, for what Bill Cody starts to run down he gets," explained Horseshoe Ned to his passenger.

"This masked Mexican seems to be here, there and everywhere, it appears, driver," said Captain Fleming.

"He do so, sir."

"He's around in spots, yer might say."

"Yes, I have heard of his sparing a lady on your coach, robbing her on the Pocket City stage, and then of holding you up when General Dunwoody was along, catching me with Red Coach Rob twice, and also holding up Four-in-hand Frank, and getting big booty."

"I would not be at all surprised to be held up on this trip, for this masked Mexican seems to accommodate himself to places and booty most marvelously."

"I hopes he won't strike me on this trip, sir."

"Well, he will get nothing from me if he does."

"You cannot get blood out of a turnip, driver."

"No, sir, but yer kin git blood when thar is blood ter git, and I doesn't want ter be bled on this trip."

"Ah! you are afraid of being shot then?"

"Not so skeered for myself, sir, as I is fer a treasure-box I has along."

"Ah! then you do carry a treasure?"

"Yes, sir, a box sent out to Miss Ruth, that is, the general's wife."

"It were expressed through to her and what she told me she were expecting and were very valuable, for it's a lot o' jewelry and other fixin's."

"And it is on your coach?"

"Yes, sir, and the value marked on it is five thousand dollars, so yer see I doesn't want ter hev the masked Mexican turn up, for thar is blood in this turnip ter git."

"So I see; but I hope we will pull through all right, driver, if we have to fight for Mrs. Dunwoody's treasure-box."

"You hain't in no condition ter fight, sir, and thet Dago cut-throat don't give one any chance to draw a weapon, for he allus catches us where we is needed for our best work with the teams, and when he shows up he has us covered."

"Still, I have one arm to defend the fair lady's treasure with, driver."

"Yer'll need 'em both and more too, sir."

"This is whar he held me up before, sir, when the general, the major and the ladies was along."

The words had scarcely left the lips of Horseshoe Ned when there came the whirr of a lariat, and both the driver and the officer were caught in the coil, while loud came the words:

"And this is where I hold you up again, senor."

"Halt! Resist, and I will kill you."

There above them on the bluff stood the masked Mexican.

It was broad daylight now, and no line of dummy horsemen were seen at the top of the ridge across the trail.

He had drawn the lasso taut, and both hands held a revolver, each muzzle covering one of the two men upon the stage-box.

With his arm bound up, his other held close by the coil, the officer was at his mercy, while the driver was almost equally so.

"What in thunder does yer want this time, yer Dago cut-throat?" shouted Horseshoe Ned.

"I want that box of treasure you have in the boot under your feet, senor."

"Come, no nonsense or delay."

"Throw it out!"

The expression on the face of Horseshoe Ned was pitiful.

He knew that it was certain death not to obey, and yet he did not wish to give up the treasure intrusted to his care.

The officer came to his relief with:

"See here, Sir Road-Agent, you robbed me of a large sum of Government funds, and gave me this wound as a reminder of you, so if you have a speck of manhood, show some mercy now and let that box go to its destination, for it belongs to a lady."

"Your empty sachel did not enrich me, senor, so why say so?"

"It is true that I did throw you the empty sachel at first, but you got the one the second time you held us up on the trail, which had the Government money, as you know."

"I did not come here to argue, senor, but to act."

"Throw that treasure-box out, Horseshoe Ned, or I pull trigger."

With an oath Horseshoe Ned obeyed, the box falling with a heavy crash in the rocky trail.

"Now drive on!"

The lasso noose was thrown off, and the coach went on its way up the hill, while the road-agent was seen to swing himself over the bluff by the lariat, and reaching the ground, to bend over the treasure-box.

CHAPTER XLIII.

THREE TRIOS OF TRAILERS.

THE letter from "Judge" Scott King to the commandant was an appeal which could not be refused.

Not knowing of the general's return from the East, the note had been simply addressed to the commandant of the post.

The general read it aloud, and promptly Buffalo Bill signified his willingness to start at once for Pocket City with his men.

He had hardly made the offer when the coach of Horseshoe Ned came in, and the driver came up to headquarters accompanying Captain Fleming, the paymaster.

The general received the paymaster cordially, and heard his story of having been ordered to report to him in the place of Major Fellows.

Then followed the story of the coach of Red Coach Rob being held up twice, the ruse to get away from the robber, and what had happened subsequently.

The second robbery, of Horseshoe Ned's coach, when the treasure-box of Mrs. Dunwoody had been taken, was made known, and the faces of all became very white and stern.

"And you were robbed, Captain Fleming, and wounded, by this same road-agent, known as the masked Mexican?" asked General Dunwoody sternly.

"I was, sir."

"And the same man it was who held your coach up, Horseshoe Ned, and took the Express package addressed to my wife?"

"It was, sir."

"And you say, Horseshoe Ned, that Red Coach Rob told you that Four-in-hand Frank had been held up on his run out, and two miners returning home had been fleeced, as well as other money gotten which was being sent through by his stage?"

"So Red Coach Rob told me, sir."

"On the run out of Frank from Pocket City?"

"Yes, sir."

"And it was with Red Coach Rob that you were wounded and robbed, Captain Fleming?"

"It was, sir."

"And on the same trip to the fort with Horseshoe Ned here, the same man robbed this coach?"

"Yes, sir."

"This implies that within thirty-six hours the Pocket City coach was robbed, then Red Coach Rob's coach twice held up and robbed, and Horseshoe Ned's stage halted and the Express package of my wife taken."

"Can this be possible, Buffalo Bill, that one man did this?"

"It is possible, sir."

"What do you think, Surgeon Powell?"

"Possible, sir, but hardly probable."

"The masked Mexican therefore has gotten three big hauls and wounded a United States Army officer within thirty-six hours?"

"So it seems, general."

"And now we have as well a letter from the Vigilante captain at Pocket City calling for you and your men to come there, Buffalo Bill, as there is work for you to do?"

"Yes, sir, and I am ready to start at once."

"That reminds me, Surgeon Powell, to ask if you ever connected the wounding of that unfortunate man, Deadshot Dean, with this Mexican who goes masked, robs our coaches and defies us?"

"I had not, sir, and now that you suggest it, sir, it may be that the masked Mexican is the intended assassin of Deadshot Dean."

"May I ask how he is, Doctor Powell?"

"Bodily well, sir, but mentally he is a wreck."

"I only told my wife awhile since of his

misfortune, and she begs to see him, and it may be her voice may recall him back to reason, for you know that they were as brother and sister."

"Yes, sir, and I was going to ask Mrs. Dunwoody to allow me to make the experiment with a visit from her to him to-morrow general."

"She will gladly go, Powell; but now I wish to get Captain Fleming into your expert hands, to look after his wounds, which I can see he is suffering with, and then I shall start Buffalo Bill off on the trail once more of this masked Mexican, for I have unbounded faith, Cody, in you and your men yet redeeming us out here by bringing that outlaw to the rope's end."

"I am most anxious to do so, general," was Buffalo Bill's reply, and the others taking their leave he was left alone with the general and Major Caruth for half an hour.

After leaving the general's quarters Buffalo Bill went to those of Surgeon Powell.

He found the doctor had just arrived from looking after Captain Fleming, and he said:

"I wish I could go with you, Bill, but I am tied here just now."

"I wish your help, Frank, and I'll tell you my plan."

"Fire away, Bill."

"In the first place I believe there are more than one of these masked Mexicans."

"Ah!"

"That is my idea, and I am going to-night with two men to Pocket City to see Judge Scott King, and that puts me upon the trail of Four-in-hand Frank."

"I see, and look up the idea the general suggested about the masked Mexican being the one who attacked Deadshot Dean."

"I'll keep my eyes upon that trail too, Doc."

"But as I will be on Four-in-hand Frank's coach trail with my two men, I wish you to start to night Wild Bill and two men he may pick out, to take the trail of Red Coach Rob's route and stick to it."

"Ah! I begin to see now, Bill."

"And send Texas Jack and two men he may select, off to patrol the trail of Horse-shoe Ned's coach."

"Let Wild Bill and Texas Jack both see the drivers on these trails and make some arrangement with them to go to their aid if wanted, as I shall do with Four-in-hand Frank."

"Yes."

"They must leave the fort secretly, get to their posts as quickly as possible, and they will know where to find each other, or me, if wanted, as I will know where to find them, and we will communicate with you if any of us should need more men, or aid from you, Frank."

"Good! for I have an intense curiosity to see the face of that masked Mexican, Bill."

"So have I, Doc, and we are going to unmask them."

"You really believe there are two of them?"

"Perhaps more."

"But it is said there is luck in odd numbers, so there are three Trios of us to start upon the trails, and we will see what the outcome will be, for there has been too bold a hand played by this outlaw of late to let him go uncaptured, and the way he has been raking in gold and treasure of late he will be a bloated millionaire road agent soon and retire from business before we can catch him, I am afraid."

"I have no such fear, Bill, with you and your Merry Men on the trail."

"Success to the Three Trios of Trailers, say I."

An hour after the Three Trios had started upon the trail of the masked Mexican.

CHAPTER XLIV.

UNDER A CLOUD.

BUFFALO BILL and his two comrades had gone before midnight, and on different trails had followed soon after Wild Bill and Texas Jack with their respective men to make complete the Trio of Three Man-Hunters each.

Surgeon Powell had found the wound of Captain Fleming the paymaster more serious than was anticipated, and had to undo

the work done by the doctor at the station who was far more a man of medicine than of surgery.

He, however, soon made the paymaster comfortable, and then went to see his patient Deadshot Dean, the miner.

The latter had been given very comfortable quarters, and everything possible had been done for his comfort.

The Surgeon Scout was devoted in his attentions to him, and was studying his strange case with all his skill, to see what could be done to bring him out of the darkness of a clouded brain.

Physically the miner was in good health.

He ate, slept, exercised, and yet all of his movements were mechanical.

He obeyed the surgeon and his attendant implicitly, yet seemed to show no interest in anything.

He heard the band play and looked the while vacantly at the musicians.

He gazed about him with no interest, no matter what the conversation with which the surgeon tried to interest him.

As a last resort the Surgeon Scout was more than glad that Mrs. Dunwoody had consented to see if she could exert an influence over the poor clouded mind of the sufferer.

"If she fails, then nothing remains but to perform an operation, and one attended with greatest danger of death; but better death than to be under such a cloud, the cloud of an imbecile mind," Frank Powell had said to General Dunwoody.

Ruth had known the miner since her earliest girlhood, and their lives had been strangely united and divided through the act of her brother, Arden Leigh, the outlaw chief, who had sought to kill Carrol Dean as his successful rival for the hand of Kathleen Clyde, whom the miner had afterward married.

Afterward the two, Ruth and Carrol Dean, had met upon the border in Pocket City, and there had her brother, Silk Lasso Sam, sought revenge still against his old rival.

But Ruth had ever been the devoted friend of Carrol Dean, as he had been her champion, defender, and like a brother.

Could she now, right from his home, his wife and child and all he held dear, drive away the cloud that befogged his brain?

That was what Surgeon Powell was anxious to know, the test he wished to make.

The general came with his wife at the appointed hour, and were received by the Surgeon Scout in his quarters.

"I have sent for Dean to come here, general, and I shall meet him in the adjoining room."

"I will have a talk with him which you and Mrs. Dunwoody can overhear, and I would like your wife to come in at a call from me and thus see if we cannot bring back the poor fellow's mind by a sight of her, a sudden start, or the recalling of scenes in his past life."

"That is just my idea, Powell, and Mrs. Dunwoody is anxious to aid you in any test which you care to make," announced the general.

Soon after the general and his wife retired to an inner room, as the invalid was seen approaching with a hospital steward.

"You can leave your patient with me, steward," said the surgeon, and taking the hand of the miner, he continued:

"Sit down, Mr. Dean, I wish to have a talk with you."

The poor man obeyed mechanically.

He was looking well, and was neatly dressed.

To one unacquainted with his case, he would have looked like a man in good health.

But he sat there like one in deep thought, his eyes fixed on vacancy.

"Carrol, my friend, I wished to ask if you have a letter from home of late?" asked the Surgeon Scout.

"From home?"

"Yes, from your wife and child, your little boy."

"I don't remember."

"But you remember your wife surely, your little son?"

"No, I don't remember."

"He shot me, you know, because she loved me, and I have never gotten well since."

"Do you mean that you are ill now?"

"Yes, here," and he passed his hand across his forehead as though he were in pain.

"But who shot you, Carrol?"

"Silk Lasso Sam."

"When?"

"Oh, long ago."

"Where?"

"At her home."

"I was standing by her side when he shot me here in the head."

"Poor fellow, you mix up the two shots, the one that Arden Leigh gave you in the long ago, and your recent wound from an unknown foe," said the Surgeon Scout sadly.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE TEST.

"SEE here, Carrol, you must try and think, for I wish you to recall certain things for me," the Surgeon Scout said in his kindly way.

"I will."

"You were first shot by Arden Leigh, who sought to kill you because Kathleen Clyde loved you."

"Do you remember?"

"Yes, he shot me here in the head."

"No, he shot you there near the heart."

"But he escaped and you came West to work a mine your father had bought."

"Arden Leigh came West and was known as Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw."

"His sister tried to redeem him and came West, where she was known as Bonnie Belle of Pocket City."

"Yes."

"You understand me?"

"Yes."

"His sister saved his life, on condition that he would leave the country."

"He did not do so, but kidnapped you from your cabin and took you to his retreat where he was starving you to death when Buffalo Bill and I found you there."

"He kidnapped also Miss Carr and Miss De Suro, and was captured and killed."

"Yes."

"Now his sister, Miss Ruth Leigh, your old time friend whom you loved as a sister, and who has been like a sister to your wife and child, has come to the West to see you."

"She heard that some enemy had gone to your cabin and tried to kill you, wounding you badly."

"Yes, he shot me here."

"Who did?"

"Arden Leigh."

The Surgeon Scout showed no impatience, but said:

"Who was with him?"

"He was alone."

"Why did he shoot you?"

"For revenge."

"He came to your cabin?"

"Yes."

"Well?"

"We fought a duel and—he killed me."

"But you brought me back to life, good friend."

"Yes, I know you, for you are the Surgeon Scout."

"Yes, and there is one other I wish you to know, one who is a sister to you."

"May I call her?"

"Who?"

"Your sister."

"Yes, but I don't know her."

The Surgeon Scout arose and walked toward the door of the inner room.

"Come in, please," he said.

Mrs. Dunwoody had dressed as she had when she was known as Bonnie Belle the Idol of Yellow Dust Valley, and had thrown about her a circular to hide the costume in going to the surgeon's quarters.

Now she threw aside the outer wrap and entered the room.

The miner looked at her, passed his hand across his head in a way painful to behold, and then said:

"You are Bonnie Belle of Pocket City?"

"Yes, and your adopted sister too, Ruth Leigh, Carrol."

"No, she is far away, but you are Bonnie Belle."

She took his hand and sat down by his side, while Surgeon Powell softly slipped into the other room where the general was.

"I am Bonnie Belle, Carrol, but I am also Ruth Leigh, for don't you remember how I met you out here on the plains, and that we became such good friends, and I went East to the old home, where your wife and little son Clyde lived so happily with me after you returned to the mines again?"

"I was East lately and I saw all your loved ones then, and they sent their love to you."

"Did they not know that I was dead?"

"Dead?"

"Why, Carrol, what makes you talk so?"

"Yes, I am dead, for see, I cannot remember now, since he shot me."

"Who shot you?"

"Your brother, Ruth."

"That was long ago."

"No, he shot me here," and the hand rested upon the bullet wound upon his head.

"But, Carrol, you forget that my poor, wicked, unfortunate brother is dead."

"Dead?"

"Yes, he was captured by Captain Caruth and given to the cowboys to bring to the fort."

"He was?"

"Yes, and when he tried to escape he was killed by Mustang Monte the cowboy."

"No, he is not dead."

"Yes, he is dead, and only yesterday I went to his grave, Carrol."

"He is not in his grave, for he is alive, and as wicked as ever."

"Why do you say so, Carrol?" asked Ruth in a distressed way.

"He killed me."

"He could not have been the one to fire upon you, Carrol."

"Yes."

"Why, do you say so?"

"I saw him."

"Where?"

"At my cabin."

"Who?"

"Arden Leigh."

"How do you know that you saw him?"

"He was masked, but I knew him."

"Impossible, Carrol, for he is dead, and you surely do not believe in ghosts."

"No, but it was Silk Lasso Sam."

"Oh, Carrol, why do you say this of my poor, dead brother, for now that he is in his grave he should rest."

"I saw the ring he wore, and the brand of Buffalo Bill in his hand."

"Yes, Bonnie Belle, it was Silk Lasso Sam who killed me," was the startling rejoinder of the demented miner.

CHAPTER XLVI.

THE SURGEON SCOUT'S SUSPICION.

BOTH General Dunwoody and Surgeon Powell listened breathlessly to the words uttered by the poor miner.

The face of the surgeon once showed that he had gleaned certain information.

Whoever the man was who had shot the miner, it was certain that he was masked, wore a ring and had the brand of Buffalo Bill upon his hand.

The miner had hinted that his foe had fought a duel with him also.

He had never spoken so freely on this point before, and it appeared as though his brain was clearing up.

He wished to have Ruth continue to question him, and realizing this intuitively, no matter what the pain to her might be, she went on as she had begun.

It might be after all that what the miner said about the duel, the brand of Buffalo Bill and the ring might be fallacies of his diseased brain, yet there could be gleaned some truth from it the surgeon hoped.

So, after the last remark of the miner, that it was "Silk Lasso Sam who killed him," Ruth continued:

"How did he kill you, Carrol?"

"He came to my cabin."

"And shot you down?"

"No, he challenged me to fight a duel."

"You fought with him?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"In front of my cabin, Bonnie Belle."

"And then?"

"He killed me."

"Who was he?"

"Silk Lasso Sam."

"How do you know?"

"I saw his ring."

"What ring?"

"The ring with a blood-red stone in it, and which I knew."

"Yes."

"He was masked."

"You could not see his face?"

"No."

"And his voice?"

"Was Silk Lasso Sam's, for I would know it in Hades."

"You say that he had a brand on his hand?"

"Yes."

"What kind of a brand?"

"A red brand."

"What was it?"

"Buffalo Bill branded the outlaws, as he captured them, with the letters in red, B. B."

"He did so that he might know them if he caught them again."

"And this man had Buffalo Bill's brand, Carrol?"

"Yes, red letters, B. B., on his right hand."

"You saw them?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"He shot me."

"And then?"

"Being dead I can remember nothing."

"Ah, Carrol, my brother, you are wounded, yes, but you will soon be well again, and can go back to your home."

"My cabin is my home."

"No, I mean the dear home in the East where your loved ones are."

"No! no!"

"Why, do you not wish to go there?"

"No."

"Not to your dear home, and see your wife and child, and tell them how rich you have made them digging in the mines?"

"No, I must not go."

"But, why, Carrol?"

"I am dead now, and I would frighten them to go as a ghost."

"No, I will not distress them, they must mourn for me dead, not be afraid of me as a ghost."

"I will not go, Ruth."

The expression upon the face of Ruth Dunwoody showed her grief.

She saw that the man's mind was utterly gone.

She saw too that he insisted that he was shot by her unfortunate brother who was in his grave.

She could say no more, do no more, and so she said:

"Well, Carrol, I must go now; but if you need me at any time, do not hesitate to send for me."

"You will come to the graveyard to see me."

"No, no, here."

"I am dead, and this is my ghost you see now."

"I must not roam about, for I will frighten people."

"But I will rest easy, I will rest in my grave when Silk Lasso Sam is dead."

"But not until then, not until then."

"Look out for him, Ruth, for he will kill you as he has me, for no one is safe when he needs gold."

"Now I must go back to my grave."

He arose, and waving his hand began to glide toward the door, when Surgeon Powell joined him, and accompanied him in silence back to the hospital.

Then he rejoined the general and Ruth at his quarters.

Ruth was weeping, and the general seemed greatly distressed.

"Ah, Powell, the poor fellow's mind is utterly gone," said the general, sadly.

"It is a wreck, sir, and I can see but one thing to do now, sir."

"And what is that?"

"By a surgical operation, sir, to raise the pressure of the skull off of the brain, for I feel that it can be successfully done, and it alone will restore him to his reason."

"You know best."

"But when will you do it?"

"Within a few days, sir; but, Mrs. Dunwoody, did his words suggest anything to your mind?"

"Did I not know my brother to be dead,

sir, I would feel that he was the one who had shot him."

"But it cannot be," the general said.

And neither the general or Ruth heard the muttered words that fell from Frank Powell's lips:

"It can be, and I believe that Silk Lasso Sam is not dead after all."

CHAPTER XLVII.

RUTH'S ADMISSION.

BACK to their pleasant quarters went General Dunwoody and his wife.

The general was distressed that Ruth had been compelled to pass through such an ordeal as her interview with the demented miner.

He knew how deeply she felt, and so sought to drive away the memory of it, once they had returned to their rooms.

But Ruth saw his object and though appreciating it said:

"Oscar, you are very kind to wish to have me forget that sad scene with poor Carrol, but I wish to talk with you about it."

"Better drop the subject, Ruth, once and for all."

"Not until we have talked it over."

"What is there to say about it, my dear?"

"Do you know that Surgeon Powell was set to thinking by some things which Carrol said?"

"He is a thinking man, Ruth, a man of brains."

"Very true, and he uses them."

"To what do you refer?"

"In the first place he caught at the idea of Carrol saying that the man who shot him fought a duel with him."

"A thought of his poor brain."

"Surgeon Powell did not think so."

"Ah!"

"I saw that he considered the matter."

"Well?"

"Carrol said also that which the Surgeon Scout marked particularly."

"What was that, Ruth?"

"That his foe wore a mask."

"Yes, I recall that he said so."

"It caused Surgeon Powell at once to think that the one who shot him *might be the masked Mexican.*"

"Why, Ruth, what a reasoner you are."

"I saw the surgeon jot this down in his memory for further reference."

"You are certainly a reader of human nature, wife of mine," said the general with a smile.

"You know what my early and later training have been, Oscar."

"Yes, you have been amid scenes where you had to think and draw upon your own resources for protection."

"I only wish that I could have protected you from all."

"It was not so to be, for I had to live out my destiny, Oscar, as you had yours, and my poor brother had to go his evil way."

"Then you think that Powell has an idea that the man who shot the miner was the masked Mexican?"

"I do."

"It may be so, and yet I saw nothing of this."

"You were watching the demented utterances of poor Carrol Dean, while I was watching Surgeon Frank Powell."

"It may be so, Ruth, and I do not doubt that the masked Mexican may be the intended murderer, for why not?"

"There is no reason why he should not be, on the contrary, every reason to believe that he did go to his cabin and seek to rob him."

"And taking advantage of an unguarded moment shoot him."

"Yes, but that is not all."

"What else, Ruth?"

"Carrol Dean said that the man was masked."

"I remember."

"That caused Surgeon Powell to feel that it might be the masked Mexican."

"Yes."

"And he said that he wore a wig."

"True."

"And had a brand upon his hand."

"Yes."

"Did Buffalo Bill not have such a brand with which he marked certain criminals, Oscar?"

"Yes."

"It seems that Powell got a recipe from an Indian medicine-man of a certain acid made from barks, which, dropped upon the human flesh, blistered it in a short while, though causing little pain, and when it healed over it left a blood-red scar."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, and Buffalo Bill cut out of a porous wood a stamp with the two letters, B. B., and when this acid was put upon the stamp and placed upon the flesh, it left a crimson scar."

"And he so branded several outlaws?"

"Yes."

"He remembers how many of course?"

"Beyond a doubt."

"Where are they?"

"Either Buffalo Bill, Surgeon Frank Powell or the hangman can account for them."

"One question more?"

"A thousand if you wish, Ruth."

"Did Buffalo Bill so brand *my brother*?"

The general started and replied:

"I believe that he did."

"But both he and Powell know."

"Surgeon Powell is sure that he did."

"You have asked him?"

"Oh no, but I saw to-day that he did."

"I saw that he felt that Carrol Dean was not raving when he said a masked man, wearing a ring and branded with B. B., shot him, and that it was Silk Lasso Sam."

"Well, Ruth?"

"Surgeon Powell does not believe that my brother is dead, Oscar, for that I am convinced of," was the startling admission of Ruth to her husband.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

A REQUEST GRANTED.

THE words of Ruth fairly startled the general.

He had to confess that he had taken all the talk of the miner as the vaporings of a vapid mind.

He had seen nothing in anything that he had said to her more than the rambling of a mind that was clouded.

He had supposed that the Surgeon Scout and Ruth had taken it in the same way.

Now to his amazement he discovered that the Surgeon Scout had found in it anything but raving, and that Ruth had seen just how it impressed Frank Powell.

The miner had mixed up Bonnie Belle with Ruth Leigh, as two different persons, and had also the same opinion of Arden Leigh and Silk Lasso Sam.

He had wandered on in a way that had made no impression upon the general, but a very deep one upon Surgeon Powell and Ruth.

Now he discovered that the surgeon deemed that there was method in the miner's madness, so far as to having as much as said that Silk Lasso Sam, masked though he was, he had recognized as the man who had sought to take his life.

"Do you really think that Powell, believes your brother alive?" asked General Dunwoody when his first surprise was over at what he heard.

"I do."

"But how can it be?"

"Simply that he does not believe that he was killed."

"But the report of the cowboys, Ruth?"

"I am not arguing against his death, Oscar, for I believe that he is in his grave; but what the miner said caused Surgeon Powell to believe that he may not have been killed."

"Nonsense!"

"But Surgeon Powell does not so regard it."

"I talked with Cowboy Charlie myself, had the story from him, and also with Mustang Monte, who was the one who shot him, and they told me just how it all occurred."

"Did Surgeon Powell hear it also?"

"Yes, for they gave their reports to me before both Powell and Buffalo Bill, and Major Caruth was also present at the time."

"Will you tell me just what that report was, Oscar?"

"I wrote you fully, Ruth."

"I know that you did, sir, and yet I wish you would now tell me."

"Well, in a nutshell, Caruth captured the man and gave him over to the cowboys to bring to the fort."

"He was put under the especial care of Mustang Monte, and in making a break for liberty was shot."

"And killed instantly?"

"Yes."

"And then?"

"He was buried where he fell, where I took you but yesterday, and that was the end of his career, and, for your sake, my dear wife, I was more than happy that he should have escaped the gallows, which seemed must be his fate."

"As I was, Oscar, for I did not wish him to die thus."

"No, on your account, though well you know how richly he merited the condignest punishment."

"I grant all."

"But you say Surgeon Powell knows all this?"

"Yes, all."

"Yet he surely doubts that he is dead."

"You surely surmise so, Ruth."

"No, I am sure of it."

"But who is this Mustang Monte?"

"No one knows, more than that he is a cowboy, and one to whom much mystery is attached."

"Tell me what you know about him, Oscar?"

"Very little, other than that he is supposed to be a Mexican, though he speaks English and Spanish with equal fluency."

"He is a man of superior education, for Cowboy Charlie told me that he reads French and German novels and has traveled a great deal."

"He joined the cowboys one day, after saving them from an attack of the Indians and thus enabling them to prevent all the cattle and horses from being captured and themselves killed by the raiders."

"They found him to be a dead shot, a most expert lassoist and unexcelled as a horseman."

"He could have been made captain of the cowboys, but declined the honor in favor of Cowboy Charlie."

"And where is he now, Oscar?"

"His time of enlistment was up when he shot your brother, so he gave up his place as cowboy, told his comrades farewell, and went Southward, no one knows where."

"A strange character indeed."

"I should like to see this man, Oscar."

"Why, Ruth, when it could only cause you pain to meet the man who took your brother's life?"

"No, for he did so in the discharge of his duty, and I could not condemn him."

"But why wish to meet him?"

"To learn from his lips the particulars in full of my brother's death."

"And why?"

"That I may show to Surgeon Powell the utterly useless belief that he possesses that Arden Leigh yet lives, and was the one who shot Carrol Dean."

"I will have a talk with Powell, Ruth, and convince him that he is not only wrong, but pains you by his suspicion."

"No, no, for he does not suspect that I believe him to hold such suspicion."

"No, Oscar, I can convince him in but one way."

"And how is that, Ruth?"

"One you must help me in."

"Command me in all that I can do."

"You are so good to me; but I am going to ask you to let me have my brother's remains taken up and sent back to the old burying-ground of my people in Virginia."

"No one knows him as Silk Lasso Sam, the outlaw, and I will feel content when he is laid to rest there."

"It shall be as you wish, Ruth," was the reply of the general.

CHAPTER XLIX.

RUTH READ ARIGHT.

COLONEL DUNWOODY was more than anxious to oblige his beautiful wife in everything.

He was devoted to her, as she was to him, and if it would give her any pleasure, or comfort, for the remains of her outlaw brother to be taken to Virginia, and, after the stormy, lawless life he had led, to be laid at rest amid the ashes of his kinsmen, he was content.

Of course Arden Leigh, whose later deeds had not been known to the good people of the

community where he had lived, was still not very highly respected by those who knew his earlier years, yet might be buried among his kindred without comment, and so let it be for the comfort it might give his brave and dutiful sister.

The general therefore sent for Surgeon Frank Powell and asked of him, as a special favor to himself and wife, that he would take the matter in charge, have the remains especially put away in a case and taken by an ambulance to where they could reach the railway for the East, all at the commandant's expense.

Surgeon Powell was only too glad to do anything for either the gallant general or his beautiful wife and willingly offered to carry out all arrangements necessary for the removal of the body.

He was the more anxious, as it would set at rest the belief in his mind that Silk Lasso Sam was not dead.

The grave would surely tell the story.

So the surgeon made his preparations, taking with him all the necessary utensils and the double coffin which had been made, and carrying all in the ambulance which was to accompany him.

Besides the four scouts who were to accompany him on horseback, he had a fifth go along as driver of the ambulance, for he was determined to keep the secret of the grave, whatever it should be, and had picked his men accordingly, men who could keep their mouths shut if he requested it of them.

He had gone to report to the general the night before his starting, and had explained just what he had done, when Ruth glided into the room.

She went up to Surgeon Powell, and taking his hand in both her own, she said in her frank way:

"You are very kind to do this for me, for it is for me, I know, and I appreciate it, I assure you, as the general also does."

"I am most happy in serving you, Mrs. Dunwoody, I assure you," was the response.

"I know that thoroughly, but there is one thing I would wish to ask you, Surgeon Powell?"

"I will be glad to answer any questions you may ask."

"Then I will be frank with you."

"Pray do."

"Are you not also glad to go upon this disagreeable mission as much for your own sake as for mine?"

"For *my* sake, Mrs. Dunwoody?"

"Yes."

"I do not exactly catch your meaning, I fear."

"In what have I not made myself clear?"

"You say I am glad to go upon this mission for my own sake?"

"Yes, that is what I said," and Ruth's smile showed that there was much behind her words.

"Well, it is a pleasure, for my own sake, to serve General and Mrs. Dunwoody, if that is what you mean, my dear madam."

"Grant that, yet I mean more."

"What is the hidden meaning, please?"

"The hidden intention is with you, for you were going to that grave if I had not asked it of you."

"I was going to remove the body without your consent?"

"I did not say that, Surgeon Powell."

"I so understood you to say."

"No, you were going to the grave to see for yourself if your suspicions were true or not."

"What suspicions, Mrs. Dunwoody?"

"I told the general that I saw in your face that what the miner, Dean, had said to you set you to thinking."

"It is only a fool that dare not think at all times, Mrs. Dunwoody."

"Your worst foe would never set you down as a fool, Surgeon Powell and such are compelled to admit the truth of what your friends all say of you."

"But your suspicion was aroused against my brother by what Carrol Dean, in his demented rambling conversation, said, and you were anxious to see whether you were right or wrong."

"And what suspicion did I hold, Mrs. Dunwoody?"

"That my brother was not dead."

"Ah, madam, you have a roundabout way of getting at the truth, but you have discern-

ed right, you have read me perfectly, I admit, for after what Carrol Dean said, though it fell from the lips which the brain did not control, I determined to go to the grave of Silk Lasso Sam and see if it held his body, or not, and just then came the request for me to do so."

"You will tell me the truth when you know?"

"The general and yourself, yes, but to no one else, for my men were selected to accompany me because I could vouch for their secrecy," was the response of the Surgeon Scout.

CHAPTER L.

THE GRAVE'S SECRET.

SURGEON POWELL and his party left the fort before dawn, that no curious eyes might be upon them.

They were well equipped for the expedition, and the scouts, if the body was found in the grave, were to go with it on to the stage-station beyond Horseshoe Ned's Run, and, if it could not be taken by coach from there, to carry it on to the railway terminus where it could be shipped.

The Surgeon Scout after seeing them well on their way was to go to the fort.

It was noon when the surgeon and his party drove up to the scene where it had been reported that Silk Lasso Sam had ended his life.

One of the cowboys, along on that occasion, joined the band of scouts, and so had told Dr. Powell the whole story as it occurred.

"You see, sir," he had said, "we was afraid to take him to the fort, as he might escape as he did once before, and we dared not openly hang him."

"So it was Mustang Monte proposed the whole thing, of how we should say how he tried to escape, and he had to shoot him, but in reality we should hang him."

"Cowboy Charlie agreed to it, and Mustang Monte took matters in hand."

"We found a good place, where we had once hung a horse-thief, and Mustang Monte set the rope, and made all arrangements."

"So we hanged him."

"But to give the idea he was shot a showing of truth, Mustang Monte he rode by and put a bullet into him."

"Then we rode on leaving Mustang Monte to bury him, and he said the job was a prime one from beginning to end."

"And Mustang Monte left the cowboy band soon after?"

"Yes, Surgeon Powell."

"Why did he leave?"

"Well, sir, he was a natural rover, and had to go elsewhere, he said."

"He had enlisted for just so long, and though all of us begged him to remain on with us, he said he must be going on his way."

"Buffalo Bill wanted him to join the scouts, but he was anxious to go and away he went."

"Have you heard of him since he left?"

"Not a word, sir."

"And he was alone when he buried the body of Silk Lasso Sam?"

"Yes, sir."

"He was buried in the disguise he wore when captured, white wig and all, was he not?"

"Yes, sir."

Surgeon Powell said no more, but his thoughts were busy, for he mused aloud:

"I cannot get the idea out of my head that there is no body in that grave, that Silk Lasso Sam still lives."

Upon arriving at the grave there was no haste shown to begin work.

The party went into camp upon a brook near by, and the four fine ambulance mules and the horses were staked out not far away.

The men then had dinner, and the coffin and tools were taken from the ambulance and carried to the grave.

Later in the afternoon two of the scouts began work with spade and shovel.

When tired, two more took hold, and after a couple of hours they came to something in the bottom of the grave.

"It runs the full length, sir," said one of the men.

"It has a blanket about it, sir," said another.

A few moments after a third man remarked:

"Yes, sir, it's the body."

Ten minutes more passed and enveloped in blankets a body was taken from the grave.

It was a most disagreeable task handling it, and as a quick examination revealed the clothing known to have been worn by Silk Lasso Sam in his disguise, and the white wig was upon the head, there seemed not the slightest doubt, even in the mind of the Surgeon Scout, but that he had been mistaken.

The remains were quickly wrapped in rubber blankets, and bound tightly, and then placed in the smaller coffin, which was screwed close and painted, after being made air-tight with putty and white lead.

This coffin was also wrapped up securely and placed in a second one, which was as securely sealed, and then fastened safely in the ambulance.

The sun had set now and the party camped where they were for the night, having filled in the grave with logs and made it to appear as though undisturbed.

The next morning the party started upon their way for the station, and after going with them for some distance the Surgeon Scout left them to continue on their way alone, while he branched off for the fort.

"Well, I was mistaken, that is all, and I must admit as much."

"But from what poor Carrol Dean said, and from the actions of that masked Mexican, I was convinced that the grave was empty and that Silk Lasso Sam was again upon the road at his old game."

"For the sake of his noble sister I am glad that it is not so."

CHAPTER LI.

THE SCOUT'S STORY.

THE Surgeon Scout, as soon as he had reached his quarters and made his toilet, went to the headquarters, anxious to make known the result of his mission, for he knew well how anxiously Ruth desired to know.

The orderly said that the general had ridden away from the fort a couple of hours before, accompanied by several of his staff, and desiring to see him first, he was turning to go, when Ruth came out upon the piazza and called to him.

He returned at once, and she led him into her own delightful sitting-room.

"You have just returned?" she said, asking a question, and he saw that her lip quivered, and how deeply she was moved.

"I returned an hour ago, Mrs. Dunwoody."

"And your men came back with you?"

"No, they went on to the station, as I had arranged."

"In case of success?"

"Yes."

"And you met with success?"

"Yes, the body was in the grave."

"You are sure it was the body of my unfortunate brother?"

"I can have no reason to doubt that it was, Mrs. Dunwoody, though of course a thorough examination was impossible."

"Were there no distinguishing marks that you could recognize?"

"Well, yes, Mrs. Dunwoody, there was the clothing he wore as a disguise when he was captured and—shot, and the wig, too, which he wore, of white hair, you know."

"Yes."

"I had the body placed in the two coffins, and they are properly addressed, as you directed, and it is now upon its way to the station under the escort of the scouts who accompanied me."

"You are more than kind, Surgeon Powell, and I have everything to thank you for; but did you leave the grave open, for you know that is said to be bad luck?"

"Bad luck?"

"Yes; or a sign of ill omen, if I may so put it."

"I had not heard that."

"You know that I was born in the South, and naturally I imbibed some of the old superstitions of the colored race."

"Naturally."

"One of these was that a body taken from a grave, which is not afterwards filled in properly, causes the spirit to have unrest forever, roaming about the haunts it knew in life, and even doomed to unhappiness."

"Then, upon that score, Mrs. Dunwoody,

rest content, for I had the grave all filled in and left as it was before."

"It is foolish in me of course to feel as I do; but I thank you for having done so."

"I had an idea that it was best, for those who might know the grave as that of Silk Lasso Sam, and see that it had been opened."

"Then in your mind there is no doubt as to the body being that of my brother, Surgeon Powell?"

"I do not well see how there can be, Mrs. Dunwoody; but I believe you have some particular reason for asking?"

"I have."

"May I know it, for if I can say more to quiet your mind, I shall be only too happy to do so?"

"I will tell you, though the general does not know that I am aware of it."

"One of Buffalo Bill's men came in a short while since, and reported to the general that he and a comrade had been held up by the masked Mexican."

"They had not been together when held up, and hearing firing ahead the scout had dashed to the aid of his companion, who was Nick Sloat, who so much resembles Buffalo Bill, you know."

"Yes, I know they are strangely alike."

"The scout's arrival put a man to flight, and he saw that it was the masked Mexican, who was on foot."

"But Nick Sloat called his comrade to his side, told him that he was mortally wounded, and furthermore said:

"Ride to the fort for Surgeon Powell, to save my life if he can."

"Tell General Dunwoody to come too, for I have something to tell him alone."

"Then, as the scout was about to obey he called him back and said:

"I may die before you get back, pard, so tell the general that the man who shot me ran upon me when I fell and cried:

"Curse you, Buffalo Bill, at last I have my revenge for your hunting me down."

"He said that he had not spoken with an accent, as the masked Mexican is said to speak, and believing him to be dead he bent over him."

"The wounded man had suddenly snatched at his mask, and the face of Silk Lasso Sam was revealed."

"My God!" cried Surgeon Powell, losing for once his cool manner at what he heard.

"The wounded man's comrade was then heard approaching at a run, and the outlaw fled, but not until he had snatched his mask, and fired another shot, which grazed the temple of his victim."

"Then the scout rode after the outlaw, and could find no trace of him, so came on to the fort after you, for he was one of Wild Bill's men, and did not know that you had gone away."

"Now, Surgeon Powell, what do you think of that?" and poor Ruth looked the picture of despair as she asked the question.

CHAPTER LII.

THE SURGEON'S MISSION.

SURGEON POWELL was deeply pained by what he had heard from Ruth.

He had held no doubt, after reaching the grave and finding an occupant in it, but that he had been wrong in his suspicions, and that Silk Lasso Sam was really dead.

If not dead, whose body was it that had been sent East?

The body had certainly been clad in the clothes which the outlaw had used as a disguise, and the wig was upon the head, so what room was there for doubt that it was the man the cowboys had reported killed?

Now came this startling story of one of the two men who had accompanied Wild Bill upon the trail, that the man's face who had shot him was that of Silk Lasso Sam, and that he had killed him, believing that he was avenging himself upon Buffalo Bill.

If the masked Mexican was what he represented himself, then he had no cause for revenge against Buffalo Bill, and he was a late comer to that part of the frontier.

But the wounded scout told his comrade that he did not speak with an accent, as the masked highwayman was known to do.

General Dunwoody had ridden to the scene, hoping to find the wounded man alive, and hear what he had to say, and the scout had returned with him.

Ruth, unknown to her husband, who had

wished to keep it from her, had heard all, and now told the Surgeon Scout, for she wished to know what he had to say, what consolation he had to give her, if any.

In answer to her question, as to what he thought of the affair, Frank Powell looked worried, but responded:

"I have no reason to doubt poor Nick Sloat, Mrs. Dunwoody, or the scout who came in with the news.

"Buffalo Bill's men are known to be truthful, splendid fellows, and they would not make a false statement in a case of this kind.

"I can soon tell though, whether the body I took from that grave is really that of the outlaw chief, or not, for an examination must be made and that will tell the story."

"If it is not his body, then the man whom the scout unmasked as Silk Lasso Sam?"

"Yes, Mrs. Dunwoody, that must be the case."

A pained look passed over the beautiful face of Ruth, and her lips quivered.

She felt deeply the situation, for if alive her brother was still an outlaw; unheeding the past he yet clung to his evil ways, and the gallows would yet be his end.

If he was dead, he filled an outlaw's grave, yet he was suspected of being alive, and that he was the masked Mexican, many had begun to believe.

Surgeon Powell felt deeply for her, and so said:

"The general does not know that you overheard what the scout said to him, you say?"

"No, he did not know that I was in the next room, and I meant not to be an eavesdropper, but heard my poor brother's name and could not resist the temptation of listening.

"He at once went to the scene, as I told you, and I was so glad when I saw that you had returned, for I felt that you could tell me the truth."

"I am sorry that I can only vouch for the fact that a body, dressed in the clothes worn by Silk Lasso Sam, and with the white wig upon his head, was found in the grave, Mrs. Dunwoody.

"The face, as I said, I did not uncover, so we did not see it, as there was no doubt as to the body being the one we had gone there to remove."

"And you can find out for me whether it is my brother's body or not, Doctor Powell?"

"I will go at once after the escort and examine the body, so there will be no mistake.

"Then I will be in a condition to tell the general upon my return the result of my investigation, for he will doubtless desire to have proof in spite of the testimony of the dying scout."

"You will place me under everlasting obligations to you, Doctor Powell, if you will do this, for I am anxious to know the truth in this matter, be it for or against Arden Leigh.

"When will you go, sir?"

"As soon as I can get ready for the ride, Mrs. Dunwoody, and I will carry with me comrades who best knew Silk Lasso Sam in life."

"Yes, there must be no mistake.

"I will inform the general of your coming and departure at once upon his return," and Ruth held out her hand in farewell.

Half an hour after, Surgeon Powell, accompanied by a scout and a soldier, was riding rapidly away upon the track of the ambulance carrying the body taken from the grave where it was said by the cowboys that Silk Lasso Sam had been buried.

CHAPTER LIII.

A RAY OF HOPE YET.

RUTH was pacing her room lost in deep and painful meditation when her husband returned.

He had made a rapid ride of it, and was both tired and hungry.

His wife greeted him in her sweetest way, sat down to supper with him and made no mention of where he had been.

The general said, by way of explanation:

"I was called away by a scout, Ruth, upon an important mission which carried me upon a long ride, or I would have asked you to accompany me."

She made no reply then, but when the

general was enjoying his after-supper cigar she said:

"Oscar, I have a confession to make to you."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, I overheard what the scout said to you this afternoon, for I was in the next room touching up that painting which was scratched, so hearing Arden's outlaw name mentioned I did not make known my presence and so know all."

"My poor Ruth, I wanted to avoid giving you pain."

"I well know that, Oscar.

"But you went to see this wounded scout?"

"Yes."

"Well, you saw him?"

"I did."

"What did he say?"

"Nothing."

"Did he not repeat what his comrade had said?"

"No, for he was dead, and the seal of eternal silence was upon his lips," said General Dunwoody impressive.

"Poor fellow."

"And he was killed by this masked Mexican?"

"Yes."

"Now tell me just what his comrade had to say?"

"I saw Wild Bill, for he was there, and he said the two men were to be wholly relied upon."

"He remained upon the trail with his comrade, and the two buried the dead man where he fell."

"I sent Wild Bill another scout the moment I arrived, to take the place of the dead man, and so there will still be three upon that trail, though it is thought the outlaw will next strike a blow upon some other trail, where either Buffalo Bill, or Texas Jack and their men are."

"And the scout repeated what he told you?"

"Everything."

"There seems to be no doubt but that the masked Mexican shot Sloat believing him to be Buffalo Bill."

"The wounded scout snatched his mask off and the face of your most unfortunate brother was revealed."

"Nick Sloat died before I reached him, and so we have only what his comrade told me was said to him as a dying confession."

"And you believe that the masked Mexican is Arden Leigh, Oscar?"

"I know not what to believe, Ruth."

"But the return of Surgeon Powell will decide for us."

"Surgeon Powell has returned," was the response of Ruth.

"The Surgeon has returned, and so soon?" quickly asked the general,

"Yes, and he has gone again."

"Then he made no discovery?"

"I will tell you just what he discovered, and why he has now gone again."

Then Ruth told the whole story, and the general listened with the deepest attention to the most minute details.

He heard the story to the end without any comment, and then said:

"Ruth, what you tell me gives me hope that the masked Mexican is not that unfortunate brother of yours."

"The fact that a body was found in the grave is suggestive of its being his."

"Then especially do the clothes and white wig, the disguise worn by the man when he came to the fort, go to prove that there can be no mistake, that the remains were Arden Leigh's, and all was as the cowboys said."

"I feel greatly cheered by this view you take of it, Oscar, for I assure you I would be more than glad to feel that my brother was dead, though it seems almost cruel to say so."

"Not so, Ruth, when his being alive could not but bring untold misery for himself and for you."

"No, no, a thousand times better is it if he is dead, and I sincerely hope this second going of Surgeon Powell will so prove it to be."

"And if not, Oscar?"

"My duty is plain, as you cannot but know."

"Yes, he must be hunted down, captured and hanged."

"If not shot, he will have to die upon the gallows, Ruth," sadly said the general.

"Oh! what a world of sorrow and trouble have I brought upon you, my husband."

General Dunwoody stepped quickly to his wife's side, and drawing her toward him said with tenderest feeling:

"All that I suffer is for you, Ruth, knowing your sorrow; but to me it is of little moment what I may feel, knowing how dear and noble a wife I have, the one whose ideal I loved for so long, and in finding the real find that she is far more, far dearer to me than I ever dreamed of."

CHAPTER LIV.

THE FLIGHT FOR LIFE.

WHEN Surgeon Frank Powell left the fort with the two who accompanied him, he rode on a trail which he knew would head off the ambulance and its escort, at the rate they would have to travel.

The four fine mules that drew the heavy ambulance Surgeon Powell knew would not be driven at a rapid pace, for there was no need to travel fast.

He made his calculation that he would catch the ambulance party some fifty or sixty miles from the fort, and be so shaped his way, hoping to head them off somewhere near the end of Horseshoe Ned's stage run.

In the meanwhile the ambulance party had jogged along at an even pace, camping early the first night out and not pulling out of camp the next morning until late.

The ghastly load they had to guard the cowboys shunned as they would a case of pestilence, and the driver of the ambulance soon decided to drive his team from horseback, rather than ride in the ambulance.

He accordingly mounted his horse and took the reins, thus driving along the trail.

Arriving at difficult places to pass over he would dismount and walk by the side of his wheelers.

Reaching the mountains the driver had to resume his place in the ambulance, for the way was too rough to drive from horseback.

It was getting toward the camping hour, and the guide ahead was looking for a good spot, when, as the ambulance wound around a dangerous shelf of rock, where the trail was hardly two feet wider than the spread of the wheels, there suddenly came a sound as though a herd of ponies were rushing down the mountain-side.

One glance up the steep mountain-side and the horrified driver beheld a perfect avalanche of rocks coming down upon them, accompanied by logs and dirt.

There was no storm raging, no wind, and yet this mass of debris had been loosened from its hold far up the mountain side and was coming with tremendous bounds down upon them.

The escorts put spurs to their horses and fled in terror, those in front for shelter ahead, those in the rear for shelter behind on the trail.

The danger was appalling, for there was a sheer leap from the trail running along the rocky shelf down a couple of hundred feet into a foaming torrent.

The torrent was a river in size, and jagged rocks broke the water in whirlpools, foaming caldron and fountains.

To go into that mad stream meant death and destruction to all.

The terrified driver saw but one chance for life, and that was to reach a cliff and find shelter beneath it.

But the cliff was several hundred yards distant, and the trail was winding, rough and narrow, so that it was dangerous to drive at a faster pace than a walk.

But in reaching that cliff the driver saw his only safety, and to its shelter the men ahead were flying at the full speed of their horses.

So upon the backs of the now frightened mules the whip was laid and they bounded forward into a run.

They needed no encouragement, for they saw their danger and knew that flight meant safety.

On they sped, and down the mountain-side swept the avalanche of rocks, timber and earth.

As it came on it increased in speed, force and size, drawing from the loose rocks,

trees and dirt as it swept down, and becoming more and more terrible as a weapon of destruction.

On rushed the team of mules over the rough trail, causing the coffin in the ambulance to break loose from its fastenings and dash from side to side with the wild jolting of the vehicle.

Several times did the frightened driver feel that his rear wheels were on the very edge of the precipice, and yet there was no power there to stop the terror-stricken mules in their now frenzied flight for life.

On, on they went, instinctively clinging to the side of the trail nearest the mountain, and the driver saw that if he reached the shelter beyond he would not be a second too soon.

He cast a glance upward at the rushing stones, and then yelled at his team.

But each mule was doing his best, and their speed could not have been increased had a pack of hungry wolves been at their heels.

With a yell of delight the driver saw that he would just reach the shelter in time, where two of his comrades were already gathered and calling to him to come on faster.

But just as his exultant cry rung out, one of the lead mules stumbled, half recovered himself and fell.

CHAPTER LV.

HEADED OFF.

A CRY of horror broke from the lips of the driver of the ambulance, as his leaders went down, and was echoed by his comrades ahead under the shelter of the cliff.

The falling mule dragged his mate down with him, and over these two the wheelers fell, snapping the pole of the ambulance and throwing it over on its side, just as the avalanche was upon it.

There was seen a confused mass of struggling mules, in the midst of which there was a man, who gave vent to one loud, long wail of despair, and then, with a roar like an increasing tidal wave, the avalanche was upon all, and went bounding from the ledge trail over the precipice.

Down, down two hundred feet went the vast weight and with a plunge that shook the mountains it went into the surging torrent below.

In the midst of the mass the cowboys who had the courage to look beheld the mules, the ambulance, the flying coffin and the poor driver.

Up to the ledge dashed the spray, there was a seething, roaring, hissing sound, and then a death-like silence, followed by the roar of the cataract, as, checked for a moment or two by the debris hurled into it, the waters went rushing along on their course once more.

"My God! that was the most awful sight I ever beheld!"

The speaker was Surgeon Frank Powell and he stood up the pass with his two comrades, having halted there, as they beheld the ambulance party coming and witnessed the whole appalling scene.

The moment the words were uttered there broke forth upon the air from far up the mountain-side a diabolical laugh that rung down the slope and reached the ears of the surgeon and his party and of the cowboy escort of the ambulance.

The eyes of all turned in the direction, and there, standing, where the last rays of the setting sun fell full upon him, was the masked Mexican.

He stood upon the summit of a ridge, from just where the avalanche had started in its downward rush, and he saw the surgeon and the cowboys, and once more burst forth in laughter such as Satan might give vent to upon getting possession of a lost soul.

Quick as a flash the repeating rifle of the Surgeon Scout was at his shoulder and a shot rung out.

It was a long shot, and a difficult one to make, for the masked Mexican had sprung for cover when he beheld the act of the Surgeon Scout.

But whether hit or not the man quickly disappeared, while Doctor Powell sprung into his saddle as though to go in pursuit.

But instantly he checked his intention, and said to his comrades:

"I fear I missed him, and it would be use-

less to attempt pursuit with night coming on.

"I will find a camping-place ahead, and you bring the men on as soon as possible."

He rode on back along the trail he had come and soon came to a grassy canyon, where there was a spring of water.

Here he halted and staked out his horse, gathering firewood while it was yet light enough to see.

He had just lighted the fire when the others came up, the cowboys with faces that were livid with terror.

They seemed delighted to get a view of the stern face of the Surgeon Scout, so full of nerve and confidence, and quickly told their story.

They had escaped, those in front by riding to shelter ahead, those behind back to shelter, but the ambulance, the team, the driver and the ghastly load had gone over the cliff together.

"I saw all, men, and may I never see another sight so terrible.

"Why, that coffin came out of the ambulance and seemed the most conspicuous object of all that went down into the torrent," said the Surgeon Scout.

"It did, sir, and we were in luck not to go with it," said a cowboy.

"To-morrow we will see if the coffin can be found, for I came to head you off, men, on purpose to have another look at the body in it."

"It'll be an ugly look, sir."

"Yes, but must be done if we can find it, which I fear is impossible."

"Yes, sir, for it burst open when it struck the cataract, and no trace of the ambulance will ever be found, sir."

"I fear that is so."

"But did you see the one who did that deed?"

"The masked Mexican, sir?"

"Yes."

"We saw him, sir, and heard his devilish laugh."

"We hope you hit him, sir."

"I fear not."

"But he was the man that sent that avalanche of rocks down upon you," and the words of the Surgeon Scout fairly startled his hearers, for none of them had thought of the masked Mexican having been the cause of the avalanche.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE SURGEON'S ANNOUNCEMENT.

THERE was little sleep in the camp in the mountains that night, for the men could not get the dread tragedy of the evening out of their minds.

The supper was hardly tasted and no one could get soothing slumber to come to them, for when they dropped off to sleep they saw the dread sight over again.

With the coming of dawn however they felt better, and after breakfast were ready for work.

The first duty was to find out if any trace of the ambulance, body of the driver, the mules or the coffin could be found.

If any could, then there was some hope of finding the coffin or its contents.

But a long search revealed that nothing whatever could be found, and at last Surgeon Powell gave the order to cease the search.

There was no doubt but that all had been dashed in pieces upon the rocks and then had been swept down by the cataract for miles and miles and there was no hope of finding a trace of anything.

The next move of the Surgeon Scout was to get up to the top of the mountain and make search for the masked Mexican.

After considerable toil the spot was reached on foot, and an examination showed that the masked Mexican had never gone there on horseback.

There was also visible the traces of where he had cut away a fallen tree, so that it would roll down the mountain-side when a prop was removed.

Behind this he had piled up stones and earth so as to form an irresistible avalanche in its downward flight.

That he must have known of the coming of the ambulance party hours in advance there was no doubt, to have thus prepared for them the death-trap he had.

He had left no trace of how he had come

or gone, and the search revealed nothing as to where he had left his horse the while.

Perhaps it was several miles away, and if found it would be of no avail, as no trail could be followed in that rocky mountain region.

Of course the masked Mexican was far away from there then, for why should he remain after having accomplished his deadly work, or as much of it as was possible, for the escort of the ambulance had escaped.

So, after camping in the mountains again all night, the Surgeon Scout started for the fort with his little command.

It was after dark when he arrived, for he had so timed to have it, and he went to the quarters of General Dunwoody as soon as he had changed his traveling costume.

General Dunwoody and his wife had company, but he was promptly admitted, and the visitors soon after took their leave, greatly to the relief of their host and hostess, who, Doctor Powell saw, were most anxious to have them go, and to hear what he had to report.

The moment they had gone the general said:

"Well, Surgeon Powell, I am glad to see you back again; but let me tell you that the masked Mexican has again been at work on the trails."

"On the stage trails, sir?"

"Yes, for he held up Four-in-hand Frank, robbing a passenger, so Cody sent word by courier, and the same day held up Red Coach Rob, killing a miner and wounding the driver himself."

"Indeed, sir, he is getting in his red work very rapidly, it seems."

"Yes."

"When was it he held up Frank's coach, sir?"

The general turned to the note brought by courier from Buffalo Bill and answered:

"It was yesterday afternoon."

"And when was Rob's coach held up, please tell me, sir?"

"Texas Jack said that it was the day before the holding up of Four-in-hand Frank's coach, as Red Coach Rob had gone through a day ahead on purpose, having a valuable freight."

"General Dunwoody, there are two masked Mexicans, sir."

"What?"

"I repeat, sir, that there are two masked Mexicans."

"You have reason for saying this, Powell?"

"I have, sir."

"Will you inform me why you think so?"

"I do not think so, general, but am sure of the fact that there are two of these men known as masked Mexicans."

"You say, sir, that both Buffalo Bill's letter and the one from Texas Jack report that the two coaches were robbed by the masked Mexican?"

"Yes, such is their report, doctor."

"Now one reported yesterday, the other the day before, and of course if Red Coach Rob's coach went on its run a day sooner, that makes it."

"It was one masked Mexican who held his coach up, wounding Rob and killing and robbing his passenger, and another who held up Frank's coach, doing little damage."

"One of these men loves to kill as well as rob, the other simply to rob, and I will prove that there are two by what I now tell you, sir."

CHAPTER LVII.

THE SEAL OF SILENCE.

BOTH General Dunwoody and his wife felt that Surgeon Powell had made some important discovery, and they awaited for him to speak.

At last, as though he had made up his mind just what to say, he said:

"Two days ago, general, Four-in-hand Frank was robbed, and it was the day before that when Red Coach Rob was held up."

"Yes."

"This would seem as though the same man had done both acts of outlawry, yet such was not the case."

"That is your belief."

"It is, sir."

"And why?"

"Well, sir, upon the day that Frank's coach was held up I saw the masked Mexican."

"You?"

"Yes, sir."

"But where?"

"A long way off, sir, from the spot where Frank was held up, and not so very far distant from where Red Coach Rob was halted."

"Indeed?"

"Yes, sir."

"But when did you see this man?"

"It was when I went to head off the ambulance party, general, when they were crossing the mountains."

"And you saw the ambulance party?"

"I did, sir, and the masked Mexican about the same time, and as it was just when Frank's coach was held up, fifty miles away, it certainly proves that there are two masked Mexicans."

"It would seem so; but did you have a good view of the man?"

"I did, sir."

"At what distance?"

"I was near enough to risk a shot, sir."

"Ah! and with what result?"

"That I do not know, general, but with no fatal result I am sure."

"The shot was quickly made, at a long distance and I hardly expected to hit him, yet could not resist firing upon him."

"He saw you also?"

"Oh yes, sir, and had prepared for the coming of the ambulance party."

"In fact, sir, it was by his red deeds that I am sure that he was the one who held up Rob, and who has been the one of the two masked Mexicans to do all the killing, while the other has contented himself with robbing alone."

"This is strange."

"I furthermore believe, sir, that the two are not allies."

"Not allies?"

"No, sir, but even unknown to each other."

"The mystery deepens greatly, Powell."

"It will deepen still more, General Dunwoody, when you hear what I have to tell you of the diabolical act of the masked Mexican whom I saw."

"It is a story, sir, I am sorry for Mrs. Dunwoody to hear, and yet she will know it all before long."

"You amaze me, doctor," and the general's look was full of anxiety as he glanced toward his wife.

"I suppose, sir, that your wife has told you of the report I had to make of my visit to the grave?"

"She has."

"And also why I went away again?"

"Yes, to head off the ambulance party and examine the body thoroughly."

"That was it, sir."

"And you did?"

"I headed the party off in the mountains, sir, as I hoped to do."

"I saw them coming along the ledge trail, so, with my two men, waited for them."

"To my horror, as they reached the center of the ledge, I beheld an avalanche of rocks break out from the mountain ridge, and rush down upon them."

"Something told me that it was not an accident, for the air was still, and I supposed that a bear or a herd of elk had loosened a rock, which had started the torrent of stones, timber and earth."

"I saw, too, that a part of the escort wheeled and rode back for the shelter of high rocks, the others dashing ahead, and that the ambulance and driver must be caught in the rush."

"I saw that he knew his danger, and put his team into a run."

"The mules needed no urging, and there was a bare hope of escape, when one of the animals stumbled and the whole team and ambulance went into a pile a wreck, and before anything could be done the rocks were upon them."

"Never do I wish to behold such a scene again, General Dunwoody, and to my dying day it cannot be blotted out of my memory."

"It was appalling, sir, for into the air, over the precipice, downward the two hundred feet into the cataract, went the mules, ambulance, the unfortunate driver and the

coffin, mingled with the stones, earth and timber from the mountain-side."

"The coffin seemed to separate itself from the debris and I saw it distinctly, and I saw it strike, sir, and there was the seal of silence placed upon what I had gone to discover, the mystery unsolved as to whether that double coffin held the body of Silk Lasso Sam or not."

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE STORY TOLD.

THE manner of the Surgeon Scout was dramatic, as he told the story of the ambulance being swept away, and both General Dunwoody and Ruth listened with thrilling interest.

The faces of both too revealed their great disappointment when they became convinced that the coffin could no longer reveal the secret they sought to know.

"Do you mean, Surgeon Powell, that no trace of the coffin could be found?" asked the general in a subdued tone.

"I do, sir, and our search was a diligent one for over half the following day."

"Remember, sir, that there was a foaming cataract at the base of the ledge, two hundred feet below."

"Yes."

"The torrent rushed along with irresistible fury, fully thirty feet in depth, going between narrow banks of rocks and with large rocks here and there breaking it into foaming caldrons and spray."

"The coffin was burst open by the fall, the driver and animals dashed to pieces, and the ambulance broken into fragments."

"I can understand that well."

"These were seized by the rushing waters and borne away to drive upon jagged rocks and against the sides of the cliff-banks until the fragments were ground into a pulp and splinters, so that no trace could be found whatever."

"And so the seal of secrecy is still upon us, and we do not know who it was that was in that coffin?" said the general, while Ruth remarked sadly:

"And we must still grope in the dark, Surgeon Powell, still must I suffer from the sorrow of not knowing whether my brother is alive or dead?"

The Surgeon Scout did not immediately reply.

He seemed undecided for a moment or more, and then replied in his low, gentle way and with a voice full of sympathy:

"My dear Mrs. Dunwoody, pardon me if I say it is best to look the whole matter squarely in the face, for your sufferings can hardly be added to thereby, while there may be a chance of taking this incubus from off your young life which you have so long and so nobly borne."

"I agree with you, Powell, and I thank you for so placing the matter before my wife," said the general.

"I am ready to hear the worst, Surgeon Powell," and Ruth's voice was without a tremor, her manner determined.

"Then let me give my views, just as I have looked at the matter."

"Certainly."

"Of course all chance to discover the secret of the coffin is gone."

"Yes."

"And you have the word of Nick Sloat, when dying, that the masked Mexican shot him, believing him to be Buffalo Bill."

"That was the case, sir."

"Then he also said that the masked Mexican, believing him dead, did not speak with an accent, and when unmasked by the scout proved to be Silk Lasso Sam."

"Yes."

"When Sloat's companion arrived and chased the outlaw away he was determined not to have the man live and tell who he was, so fired again upon him, hoping to silence his lips forever."

"Which he must have believed he did do, as he did not return to the dying man after his comrade came on to the fort."

"Very true, general."

"Now, this man, whoever he may be, was certainly cognizant of the fact that I had been to the alleged grave of Silk Lasso Sam."

"Ah!"

"Knowing that the body was removed, he

supposed that it was still believed to be that of Silk Lasso Sam, but aware, perhaps, that the man had not died immediately, whom he ambushed, and may have reported him as he was, he was desirous of destroying the proof that opening the coffin and investigating the remains would give."

"Yes, Powell, yes."

"You are on the right trail," said the general with more excitement of manner, while Ruth listened with the most intense interest.

"Now, to destroy this proof he plotted, went on the mountain trail he knew the ambulance party must follow, and prepared to destroy them all."

"If he did not wish the destruction of the proof in that coffin, why destroy it as he did?"

"You are right, doctor."

"Now he hung about the mountains, held up the coach of Red Coach Rob, and then stood ready to destroy the ambulance and its load in the cataract."

"And it was there that you saw him?"

"Yes, sir, for, exulting in his work, with night coming on and knowing we could not reach him, he showed himself to us and laughed in the most diabolical merriment that I ever heard fall from human lips."

CHAPTER LIX.

TO PATROL THE TRAILS.

"WELL, Surgeon Powell," said General Dunwoody, after he had heard all that the doctor had to say:

"I feel as you do, I must say, for let me tell you that it looks very much like proof that the masked Mexican wished to hide the secret of what the coffin could reveal, when he so deliberately plotted the destruction of the ambulance."

"It was a terribly sad death for the poor driver to meet, and I feel most keenly the misfortune."

"And I, too, believe, from all that I have heard, Surgeon Powell, that this masked Mexican is no other than my brother, Arden Leigh."

"It looks as though his red hand was at the bottom of these cruel, deadly acts, for he fairly seems to revel in blood, and, be he what he may to me, I most sincerely hope his wicked career will be brought to an end."

"It must be, Mrs. Dunwoody, for before long the news will go to the cities of the far East even, that one man, a masked Mexican, is defying all the power that General Dunwoody can bring against him, and eluding Buffalo Bill and his men, while he is daily committing the most daring crimes and going unwhipped of justice."

"Yes, Powell, we must capture that man."

"Those men, sir."

"You still cling to the belief that there are two of them?"

"I am sure of it, sir, though one is the greater criminal."

"It may be."

"But what does Cody think?"

"I am not certain, sir, what his opinion may be as to there being more than one of these masked Mexicans."

"Well, Cody, Wild Bill and Texas Jack, with two picked men with each leader, are after the man, or men, as the case may be, and I have faith that they will catch the scamp, or scamps, after all."

"In the end, sir, Buffalo Bill and his men will catch them without doubt, but it will do no harm to hasten matters."

"I am willing."

"I would like, sir, to ask permission to go the rounds of the Three Trios, sir."

"Certainly."

"I will first go to find Wild Bill, then to Texas Jack, and last to Buffalo Bill's patrolling-ground, and carry with me extra horses to leave with each."

"In this way I can keep each Trio posted of the movements of the other, and perhaps come upon the masked Mexicans myself while upon my rounds."

"It will be most fatiguing for you, Powell."

"I do not mind that, sir, for fortunately I am blessed with an iron frame that stands hard work well."

"Then you can go."

"Thank you, sir."

"But I wish we knew where to find Mustang Monte."

"Why?"

"Well, sir, he was the man who buried Silk Lasso Sam, as alleged, and gave him his death wound, and I would like a talk with him."

"He is a Prairie Rover, I have heard."

"Yes, sir, and no one can tell where he may be now; but still I should like to know where to find him."

"You will have to compromise by finding the masked Mexicans, Surgeon Powell."

"I only hope that I may, Mrs. Dunwoody."

"When will you start, doctor?" asked the general.

"To-night, sir."

"Without rest?"

"I can rest when I camp, sir."

"And you wish no one to accompany you?"

"Yes, sir, I will take Pony Bob with me, for he is a light, wiry little fellow, tough as a pine-knot, and if I need help, when not near either of the Trios, I can send him after them."

"You are wise there."

"But had you not best make a Trio also?"

"No, sir, for I believe that two of us will be all that are needed."

"Now, sir, I will get away as soon as possible, for I am anxious to be on my way."

"Have you any orders for Buffalo Bill, sir?"

"No, for you know better than I do any orders that may be necessary," said the general, with perfect confidence in the Surgeon Scout.

Bidding General and Mrs. Dunwoody good-night, Surgeon Powell went to his quarters and at once sent for Pony Bob.

The latter came at once, a small, wiry athlete, with black eyes and hair and a look that was fearless and resolute.

"Pony Bob, I wish you to get three of your best horses and go with me."

"All right, sir, I will be ready within ten minutes."

"It's a dangerous trail to take, Bob, so go well armed."

"I am glad of it, sir, for I do not like monotony."

"I will meet you here, sir?"

"No, outside of the stockade at the north gate."

"Yes, sir."

Soon after Surgeon Powell, mounted upon a splendid roan, and with two other fine animals in the lead, rode away from his quarters, and, joined by Pony Bob, had started upon his patrol of the Three Trios' trails.

CHAPTER LX.

ON THE ROUNDS.

BUFFALO BILL and his men had most faithfully patrolled the runs of the different stage lines, for Wild Bill and his two comrades fairly haunted Horseshoe Ned's beat, Texas Jack was constantly going over Red Coach Rob's and the chief of scouts was night and day along the drive of Four-in-hand Frank.

It was thus that Buffalo Bill hoped that one of the Trios would fall upon the masked Mexicans, for the reader will recall that the chief of scouts also felt certain that there were a couple of these outlaws, and perhaps more.

Yet, in spite of the diligent watch kept upon the trails the masked outlaws managed to catch the coaches at some unguarded point.

It was knowing well the difficulty of the Three Trios guarding so much country that the Surgeon Scout thought that he could go the rounds and be of service.

It would form a line of constant communication, and, if he did not spare himself he could make the rounds every forty-eight hours.

Starting by the northern trail he would pass along the down trail and thus on by the southern run to Pocket City and so on via the fort back to Wild Bill's beat again.

With Pony Bob as a courier, and each leaving a horse with the Trios, he could readily communicate, while the three drivers, Horse-

shoe Ned, Red Coach Rob and Four-in-hand Frank, as their days of coach travel, would also serve on a means of communication.

The Surgeon Scout rode on with Pony Bob until dawn and then went into camp for a couple of hours, when they again pushed ahead to soon after come up with Wild Bill.

Explaining why he had come to Wild Bill the latter deemed it a good idea and was very glad to keep a relay of horses in his camp, wherever it would be.

"We must catch this fellow, Doctor Powell, or we will be set down as no good," said Wild Bill.

The surgeon had the same opinion and said as much.

That night they found Texas Jack just at sunset and went into camp with him.

Texas Jack explained how Red Coach Rob had been held up at one end of his run while he and his scouts were at the other and said:

"Now we will catch him, I am sure, Surgeon Powell, as you are going on the rounds."

The next morning the Surgeon Scout and Pony Bob started upon their ride to find Buffalo Bill on Four-in-hand Frank's trail.

They had left their second relay of horses with Texas Jack, so rode on unhampered.

It was about noon when they saw Buffalo Bill ride into the trail ahead of them.

The two friends grasped hands warmly and Surgeon Powell explained just what he was doing.

"It is the very thing, Frank, and now I have hopes that we will not be long in catching those fellows," said Buffalo Bill.

"We must not be, Bill, if we expect to save the credit of the fort," was the answer.

"Well, you won't leave until later, for you can go to Pocket City for the night."

"Yes, and on to the fort to-morrow."

"But you feel sure that there are two masked Mexicans?"

"They are so clever in eluding us, and they accomplish so much, I almost begin to feel that there is a whole band of them, Doc."

"No, I draw the line at three, with belief only in two."

"I guess you are right; but how is poor miner Deadshot Dean?"

"Just the same in mind, but physically all right."

"I have decided to operate upon him when I reach the fort."

"Well, you might as well put him out of his misery as to have him a madman, and I believe you know what you are about, Frank, so I say it is worth the risk."

"I would never make the attempt if I did not think so, Bill."

Later in the day, having had a full understanding with Buffalo Bill, the Surgeon Scout started upon his way once more, accompanied by Pony Bob.

That night they stopped at The Frying Pan, in Pocket City, and Surgeon Powell had a talk with the Vigilante captain, Judge Scott King.

He found that the miners were becoming very severe in their criticisms of the army for not capturing the masked Mexican, for all believed that there was but one man, and that the coaches were running empty as no one dared travel with any money, and even without, for fear they would be shot for not having anything to be robbed of.

Before dawn the two were on their way again, and at noon the fort was reached, the surgeon and Pony Bob having been a little over forty-eight hours on their first round of the trails of the Trios of Buffalo Bill and his men.

When he had reported to the general, Frank Powell gave orders to have all in readiness for an operation upon the miner, and then threw himself upon his bed for a rest of a couple of hours.

CHAPTER LXI.

ALL LIKE UNTO A DREAM.

SURGEON POWELL awoke fresh and full of nerve from his sleep, and ready to undertake the dangerous work which he had decided upon in the operation of Deadshot Dean the miner.

He went to the hospital and found all prepared as he had directed.

His assistants were there, and the miner was in his room wholly indifferent to all that was going on about him.

"Well, Friend Dean, how are you feeling now?" asked the surgeon, as he grasped his hand.

"I feel well," was the reply.

"I hope soon to have you feeling better, for, Dean, I intend to operate upon you, believing I can remove the pressure upon your brain and make you yourself once more."

"Yes."

"You wish me to do so, do you not?"

"Yes."

"Do you fear to have me make the attempt, Dean?"

"No."

The doctor then had the miner prepared for the operation.

He was given chloroform and placed upon a table, while the surgeon got his instruments ready and the moment his patient became wholly unconscious he began work.

There was not the slightest tremor of the hand, not a shadow of doubt upon the stern, handsome face of Surgeon Powell, as he made the first incision in the scalp and then began the delicate and dangerous task of raising the depressed skull bone from weighing upon the brain.

His assistants watched him with admiration akin to awe as he worked so skillfully and with such splendid nerve and boldness.

At last the operation was over, the scalp sewed and bandaged in place, the wound dressed and all awaited the returning to consciousness of the miner.

It was not very long, yet it seemed to the watchers that it was ages that they watched and waited.

The surgeon held the pulse of his patient and his face showed no sign of doubt or anxiety.

At last the eyes of the patient opened slowly and he looked about the room.

Then came the question:

"Why, where am I?"

"In my keeping, Deadshot Dean."

"Ah! it is you, Surgeon Powell?"

"Yes."

"Have I had a fearful dream, or is it real and was I not killed after all?"

"You have been like one in a dream, Dean, for you was shot in the head."

"But I have operated upon you and I hope with success, for your mind is not closed now, I believe."

"No, I see, I feel all, yes, the pain in my head—from the wound, you said."

"The wound had healed long ago, but as I told you, I have performed an operation upon you, to clear up your mind."

"How do you feel bodily, may I ask?"

"Perfectly well, sir."

"And mentally?"

"I am dizzy, and I suffer pain here in my head."

"They both will pass away with rest and sleep."

"But you said I had been weeks wounded?"

"Yes."

"Have I been out of my head all that time, Surgeon Powell?"

"Yes, but now you will get well mentally, and quickly."

"It all seems like unto a dream to me now."

"Where am I?"

"At Pioneer Post in the hospital."

"And I have been here a long while?"

"Yes."

"And my loved ones?"

"Are well, and at your home, for they were not told of your condition, as I deemed it best they should not know yet awhile."

"It is better so, and I thank you."

"But tell me more, please, for my thoughts are still confused?"

"Buffalo Bill and I found you wounded at your cabin, and brought you here."

"Ha! now I recall all."

"It was not a dream then?"

"What was not a dream?" quietly asked the Surgeon Scout, still perfectly cool, though overjoyed at the result of his experiment.

"That I had fought a duel with the masked Mexican and that he had shot me!"

"It was the masked Mexican then who wounded you?"

The miner said quickly:

"Yes, he came to my cabin, caught me at a disadvantage and challenged me to meet him in a duel."

"We fired together and I fell.

"I know no more, Surgeon Powell, yet it seems that much has passed before my vision since then.

"Yes, I recall seeing you again and again, and Ruth and many more.

"But it was all through a hazy atmosphere, a cloud, and not as I see and speak now.

"It seems as though I have suffered so much, here in my head.

"But I am better now, and rational, am I not?"

"You certainly are, Mr. Dean."

The miner then bent forward and said in a whisper:

"Then do not consider me raving when I tell you that I recognized the man who shot me, the masked Mexican, and he is none other than *Arden Leigh, alias Silk Lasso Sam the outlaw.*"

CHAPTER LXII.

THE SURGEON'S SUSPICION.

SURGEON POWELL did not go to headquarters to make known the result of his surgical operation, until after Deadshot Dean had sunk into a sleep which lasted for an hour or more.

When he awoke his mind seemed as clear as ever it had been, and the surgeon had a long talk with him.

Then it was that he went to headquarters, and was ushered at once into the presence of General Dunwoody and his wife.

They looked at him anxiously, for they knew that he had come to tell whether it was life or death to the miner.

But his face revealed nothing, and they awaited with impatience his words:

"Do not feel anxious, Mrs. Dunwoody, for I have good news to report to you."

Her face asked the question as to what the good news might be, and Surgeon Powell answered:

"It is that Deadshot Dean's mind is clear once more, his reason having returned to him fully."

"Thank Heaven!" cried Ruth, while the general grasped the surgeon's hand and said: "Powell, I congratulate you most heartily."

"The operation was successful, then?"

"A perfect success, sir, for Dean awoke like one from a long sleep."

"I have had a long talk with him, and all between his being wounded and his awaking is a blank."

"He recalls having seen me, and others, he remembers that he saw Mrs. Dunwoody, and also felt that he suffered pain in his head."

"But all else was as a dream to him until the pressure of the skull upon the brain was removed, when back swung the pendulum of reason to him just where it had been stopped by the bullet."

"He began to think from that moment only, and he told me all that had happened to him."

"Then he knew his foe?"

"He did, sir."

"Something in the manner of the Surgeon Scout caused Ruth to quickly ask:

"Was it the masked Mexican, sir?"

"Yes, Mrs. Dunwoody."

"Then he went there to rob him and so shot him."

"Miner Dean was taken at a disadvantage he says."

"Tell his story please, Powell, for I see that my wife is dying to hear all."

"He says that he was writing home, when the masked Mexican appeared in his cabin behind him."

"His belt of arms was beyond reach so he was wholly at the mercy of the outlaw, who told him he had come for revenge."

"The result of it was that a duel was arranged, and fought between them, but Miner Dean remembers only that he felt the blow of the bullet as it struck his head."

"He does say, however, that he recognized his foe."

"As the masked Mexican, you said, sir?"

"Yes, Mrs. Dunwoody, and as one other who had been his life foe."

"Ah! does he, too, say the masked Mexican is Arden Leigh, Surgeon Powell?"

"He does, Mrs. Dunwoody."

"But he did not see his face?"

"No, but he saw a ring which he said that

Arden Leigh wore, and which he knew well, while he also saw in his hand the brand which Buffalo Bill had put there."

"Ah me! then there is no doubt?"

"None whatever, for he said that he recognized his foe by his voice and in many other ways, and that Silk Lasso Sam was surely not slain as the cowboy asserted, and reported to you, General Dunwoody."

"I will at once send for all those men and hear their report again, and you, Surgeon Powell, remain, while Ruth, you go into the next room where you can hear yet not be seen."

An orderly was dispatched for the cowboys, who were just then at the fort, it being payday, and soon they put in an appearance at headquarters.

There were there, with several exceptions, all who had been of the party into whose keeping the prisoner had been given.

One by one they told their story, Surgeon Powell making notes, and all agreed, it was discovered, when General Dunwoody and the doctor compared notes afterward.

They reported how Mustang Monte had been the keeper and had shot the prisoner to prevent his escape, and then buried him.

But, for their own good they had decided to hang him, fearing he might escape, and that Mustang Monte had been executioner and the one left to bury the body as well, as also the one who had fired the shot into the swinging form of Silk Lasso Sam.

About Mustang Monte they knew nothing more than that he had gone away, having served his time.

When they had gone Surgeon Powell said, in his decided way:

"General Dunwoody, I do not suspect those men of treachery, but I do Mustang Monte, for through his aid alone could Silk Lasso Sam now be alive, as he certainly is this day."

CHAPTER LXIII.

TWO PASSENGERS.

THE night following the operation upon the miner, Surgeon Powell and Pony Bob again left the fort upon their rounds.

They rode rapidly as far as the camp of Wild Bill, and it was found that the latter had made no discovery and no trace of the masked Mexican had been seen or heard.

So they went on their way to the camp of Texas Jack, and there the same story was to be told.

There was no trail to be reported, and the coach over that patrol had passed in safety.

The next ride was to the beat of Buffalo Bill.

But before reaching the locality where they expected to find the chief of scouts and his men, the former suddenly appeared before them.

"Ho, Bill, anything new?" asked Surgeon Powell.

"I'll tell you, Doc, just what it is, and why I am here," was the answer.

"Fire away."

"My men are back at the camp and I came on alone, hoping to find you."

"Here I am, Bill."

"And mighty glad I am of it, Doc, for I found a trail and followed it to a spot where it can only mean an ambush for Four-in-hand Frank's trail when he goes in."

"How many?"

"Only one."

"Well?"

"I then came on here, by a flank movement to head you off, for I thought we could leave our horses with Pony Bob and go as passengers in Frank's coach."

"Good!"

"When held up Frank could pretend to have no passengers and thus catch the masked Mexican off his guard, while we, looking through holes in the curtain, could take advantage of his believing he had only the driver to deal with and thus rope him in, or kill him."

"Kill him, Bill, for it would be best, as that man is Silk Lasso Sam, and the general does not wish to hang his brother-in-law."

"But there are two of them, Frank."

"True, so we will rope him in and then decide what is best to be done with him."

"Yes, that is best; but now to find a camp and wait for Frank to come along, and Pony Bob can follow with our horses."

So it was decided, and the three came until the coach of Four-in-hand Frank was seen coming along the trail on its way to Pocket City.

The driver was delighted at the company he was to have, and fortunately the coach carried no passengers.

So the surgeon and the scout got into the coach, with their weapons and lariats, and Pony Bob was to slowly follow, leading their horses.

Buffalo Bill told Four-in-hand Frank the spot where he believed the masked Mexican was lying in ambush, and so, all prepared, the coach pulled on its way once more.

As Frank neared the spot he broke out into a ballad of the prairies, and he knew this would convince the outlaw, if there, that he had no passengers along.

Frank had a good voice and he never sung with more feeling, for he did not know what instant his singing might be checked with a shot.

He had just reached the designated spot of ambush when suddenly there rode out into the trail in front of his leaders none other than the masked Mexican.

"Halt! Hands up!"

Frank drew rein quickly, his song ending very suddenly.

"Well, Senor Frank, what have you along for me this time?" asked the masked Mexican in broken English.

"I carries a empty hearse, pard."

"No passengers?"

"Not one."

"And what have you of value?"

"Nothing."

"Beware, for if you lie to me it will go hard with you and I am determined to search your coach from wheel to top."

"You won't take my word for it then?"

"No."

"Well, pard, I s'pose I has ter own up and tell yer."

"Well?"

"I has got two packages o' value inside ther old hearse, but I don't know as they'll do you much good."

"Why not?"

"They hain't jist what you want."

"Are they packages of value?"

"I guesses so; but you kin take a peep at 'em, and ef yer says yer must have 'em, why I can't help yer taking 'em."

"Get down from your box and hand them out for me to look at."

"Don't yer know I was wounded in ther hip, pard, and kin hardly git up and down?"

"How were you wounded?"

"Didn't you shoot me?"

"I?"

"Yer has a poor memory, pard."

The masked Mexican muttered something to himself, but said aloud:

"All right, if it causes you to suffer when you move, I'll look at the packages; but undo your belt of arms and hang it on the whip-socket there, and then raise your hands above your head until I tell you to lower them, for I will stand no nonsense."

"I has had proof of that, pard, so I does as you tells me."

With this the driver obeyed the orders given him, and dismounting, the masked Mexican, revolver in hand, approached the coach door.

But just as he placed his hand upon it, open it flew with a force that dealt him a severe blow in his face and knocked his revolver from his grasp.

CHAPTER LXIV.

SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY.

THE latch of the coach door had already been turned by Buffalo Bill, who crouched down in the bottom of the stage, all ready for action.

His intention was to spring upon the masked Mexican, leaving Surgeon Powell to follow and take advantage of the situation as he deemed best.

The scout had dashed open the door, however, with such force that he had struck the outlaw a severe blow with it, striking his weapon from his hand and half stunning him.

At the same time the scout leaped upon him with irresistible force, and had him down upon his back.

The Surgeon Scout had followed, and Four-in-hand Frank had leaped from the box

to the ground in a way that showed his wound had been very suddenly healed.

The masked Mexican was a man of powerful build, but he had been caught at a disadvantage and completely surprised.

He was down and disarmed before he could offer resistance, and deft hands quickly secured him with a lariat in less than a minute of time.

"I am fairly caught, Buffalo Bill, and just as I was arranging to give up this life, and go far from here," he said, in a dejected tone.

"That is always your whine, Silk Lasso Sam, when you get into trouble.

"You are always going to repent," answered the scout.

"I am not Silk Lasso Sam."

"What?"

"I am not Silk Lasso Sam."

"Who are you then?"

"Let us see, Bill," and Surgeon Powell drew the mask from his face.

Then the scout and the surgeon cried together in amazement:

"Mustang Monte!"

"Yes, you know me I see."

"I never suspected you of being a robber, Mustang Monte," the scout said.

"But I'll tell you, Mustang Monte, what I suspected you of."

"What is that, Surgeon Powell?"

"Of aiding, in some mysterious way, Silk Lasso Sam to escape from death."

"You know this, Surgeon Powell?" quickly asked the prisoner.

"I do."

"How do you know it?"

"Silk Lasso Sam is alive and again at his old tricks, for he is also known as the masked Mexican."

"You know this, sir?"

"Do you deny it?"

"I cannot, sir."

"Then you did aid him to escape?"

"I did, sir, and I will tell you why."

"I should very much like to know."

"Well, sir, in Silk Lasso Sam I recognized one who had rendered me good service in Mexico, and who had saved my life there."

"He called upon me to return that favor, and I could not refuse him."

"I consented on condition that he should leave the border and be seen no more."

"So I arranged it when the boys decided to hang him, to tie the rope so as not to choke him to death."

"I also drew the lot to be the one to shoot him and to bury him."

"I shot at his hanging body, but there was no bullet in the pistol."

"Then I cut him down when the others left and brought him to, for he was in a bad way, having been badly choked after all."

"The boys had killed a horse-thief two days before, and he was buried not far away, so at the request of Silk Lasso Sam I rigged the body up in his wig and clothes and we planted that in the grave."

"I then took the outlaw to a lonely camp in the mountains and left him."

"There was a cache of provisions there and he got along pretty well."

"But he broke his word to me, as soon as he got able to go on the trail, and returned to his old retreat where he had clothes and treasure hidden away."

"He took to the trail once more and I was one of the first men he met."

"I had been paid off and left the Cowboy League, and catching me from ambush he robbed me of nearly all I had, showing me no gratitude for having saved his life as I had."

"He laughed at me and then shot me."

"I pretended that the bullet had entered my heart and fell."

"Believing that he had killed me he left me, after rolling me into a stream."

"I swam ashore, and let me show you what saved my life."

"You see this portrait—it is destroyed now by the bullet which you see imbedded there."

"But it was the likeness of one I loved and who was made to marry another."

"I have worn it over my heart and it saved my life."

"Then I decided to seek revenge, and to do so I got a horse like the one silk Lasso Sam rode, a Mexican suit, a mask, and spoke

in broken English as he did to hide his identity.

"I was determined to haunt him like a shadow of himself."

"Being without money I did wrong, for I held up the coaches as he did, and robbed."

"But I never took life as he did."

"All the while I was on his trail, dogging his steps, and having tracked him to his lair I had just determined this night to capture and kill him, get his treasure and go my way."

"But I am your prisoner and he goes free still, defying you to the last."

"I have no more to say, gentlemen, more than that having sinned I am ready to suffer the consequences."

CHAPTER LXV.

THE AVENGER.

SURGEON POWELL and Buffalo Bill had listened to the story of Mustang Monte with the deepest of interest.

Frank had gone on his way, but had been told to make no report of the capture of the masked Mexican, as there was one other yet to take, and he had promised to remain silent upon the subject.

Pony Bob had come up with the horses, and the party now mounted and rode off the trail some distance to go into camp.

There they sat down for a talk, the surgeon and the scout just walking apart for a conversation together.

At last they came to where Pony Bob sat guarding the prisoner and Surgeon Powell said:

"Mustang Monte, we wish to have a very serious talk with you."

"Yes, sir."

"Buffalo Bill tracked you to your ambush so to him belongs the credit of your capture; but as an officer of the army he wishes me to say certain things to you."

"Yes, Surgeon Powell."

"You must be well aware that the crimes you have been guilty of would cause you to be very quickly hanged, did we carry you a prisoner to the fort."

"I am sure that I would be hanged, sir."

"Well, we believe the story you have told, as to how you saved Silk Lasso Sam."

"We have the proof that he is still alive, and you show us the proof that, after all you did for him, he was as treacherous to you as a snake would be."

"That is true, sir."

"That is his nature."

"But you said, when you told us your story over on the stage trail, that you had desired to give up your wicked life."

"I had, sir."

"But first you intended to avenge yourself upon Silk Lasso Sam."

"I did, sir."

"You told us that you had tracked him to his lair and intended killing him and taking his treasure."

"I'll tell you, sir, that I intended to capture him and take him to the fort and give him up to Buffalo Bill, after which it was my intention to secure his treasure and go my way."

"Ah, that was it, was it?"

"Yes, sir."

"Well, Monte, I am ready to offer you terms."

"Terms, sir?"

"Yes."

"What for, sir?"

"You have robbed the coaches of the Overland of certain amounts?"

"Yes, sir."

"Name your robberies."

The man did so.

"Now give the amounts you received in each instance."

This Mustang Monte also did.

"Are you in possession of all that you took?"

"I have it hidden away, sir."

"Well, I have just this to say:

"Return those sums, place them in my keeping to be restored to their proper owners, and then aid us to capture this man Silk Lasso Sam, and you shall go your way free, taking with you certain moneys which he has not taken of late in his robberies."

"Refuse and you shall be taken to the fort to suffer the penalty of your crimes."

"What will you decide to do, Mustang Monte?"

"I love life, sir, and I will gladly do as you ask, for I shall gain my pardon, have my revenge in having brought Silk Lasso Sam to the end of his rope, and yet not go penniless upon my way."

"You are most kind to make the offer, Surgeon Powell, and I thank you, sir, most sincerely."

"I wish to be just toward you, as Cody does, for we do not believe you so very wrong at heart."

"We will do as we have said, so get ready to carry out your part of the compact with us."

"I am ready now, sir."

"Where is Silk Lasso Sam now?"

"At his lair, sir, for he has certain times for going there."

"Does he know that you are upon his trail?"

"No, sir, for he thinks I am dead, you know."

"But he must know that there is a second masked Mexican in the field."

"He does, sir, and it worries him, I know, for he cannot understand it."

"He has tried to find me, to ambush me, but I have eluded him and in every case been the one who has successfully dogged his steps."

"And his lair is how far from here?"

"About ten miles, sir."

"You have been there?"

"Half-a-dozen times, sir."

"And can get there again without giving an alarm?"

"Yes, sir, for I have seen him counting his treasure."

"Why did you not kill him then?" asked Buffalo Bill.

"The greed of gold was upon me, sir."

"I wanted to wait until both he and I had gotten more treasure," was the answer.

"But at last you had determined to act?"

"Yes, Buffalo Bill, this very night."

"Then you shall have the chance, though you act under different circumstances from what you had intended," was the response of Buffalo Bill.

"I am ready, for I save my life by what I do," Mustang Monte replied, and added in a low tone:

"If I lose my treasure, I get my revenge at least."

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE OUTLAW'S RESOLVE.

It was a very bitter blow to Mustang Monte to feel that he had been captured, and yet he was indeed glad to have fallen into the hands of Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill.

Had others been his captors he might have fared much worse, in fact have lost his life without any mercy whatever being shown him.

He was glad now to do an act of justice by aiding the surgeon and the scout to find Silk Lasso Sam, who had so often escaped, so persistently clung to his evil life against all entreaties, all warning.

It was as Mustang Monte had really said, that he had been betrayed by Silk Lasso Sam, had been laughed at when he had every reason to expect mercy, and aid, and then had been ruthlessly shot down by the man whom he had so well befriended, and, believed to be dead, had been robbed and rolled into a stream to be swept far away from the scene of the wrong.

Mustang Monte recalled how one night in Mexico, when he had stopped at a hacienda, he would have been murdered in his bed but for a warning given him by Silk Lasso Sam.

Why he had warned him he never knew, could never understand, and it seemed, in viewing him by his later deeds of cruelty, crime and mercilessness, he had done so merely because he expected he would find the man he served useful in the future in some way.

But he had befriended him, had warned him of danger, guided him out of the hacienda, gotten his horse and weapons for him and told him where he would find safety.

Why he had remained behind in the hacienda, Mustang Monte could not tell, and he could only feel that Silk Lasso Sam was in some way connected with the ones who sought his life.

But he made his escape and was thankful to the man to whom he owed his life.

This was the service done him which he had returned by saving the life of Silk Lasso Sam by strategy, when the cowboys had sought to hang him, and his story told Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill was a true one.

But, after the arrant treachery shown him by Silk Lasso Sam, Mustang Monte had determined to seek revenge.

To get it, knowing that Silk Lasso Sam believed that he had killed him, he decided to cause him first to suffer torture by haunting him by day and night.

So he had rigged up as a second self, a double of the outlaw, and thus hung upon his trail.

He knew that Silk Lasso Sam would soon hear of his existence, and become worried, alarmed, and in the end greatly terrified.

Having tracked him to his lair, he wanted to let Silk Lasso Sam secure all the plunder he could, which would at once be stowed away in his retreat.

He would do the same, for Mustang Monte could not, or did not, resist the temptation to get gold, especially as his enemy would get the blame for all, and thus he could in the end be avenged, and also carry with him quite a large sum in money.

So it was that Mustang Monte had told the whole truth to the surgeon and the scout, and to atone for his sin was more than willing to do all in his power to aid in bringing Silk Lasso Sam to his doom, for, as he had said:

"If I lose my treasure, I at least get my revenge."

Had he been given the choice between allowing Silk Lasso Sam to escape, or getting his treasure, there is no doubt but that Mustang Monte would have quickly chosen the loss of money, and gloated in the death of his foe.

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE DISCOVERY.

HAVING made up his mind as to what he would do, Mustang Monte was ready and willing to carry out his resolve.

He accordingly told the scout and the surgeon to follow his lead, and so confident were they that he meant well, that he would not deceive them, that they allowed him to go free.

He mounted his horse and led the way, and in single file the others followed, Buffalo Bill riding immediately behind him.

Mustang Monte's thoughts were busy as he rode along, and he began to fully realize how wrong he had done in robbing the coaches as he had.

Had he merely sought to haunt Silk Lasso Sam, to be avenged upon him, he would have acted well; but he had endeavored to enrich himself as well, and he realized fully his crime.

In guiding the surgeon and Buffalo Bill to the secret retreat of the outlaw, Mustang Monte decided to first go to the spot where he had hidden away the treasure and booty, which he had taken from the coaches during his short career as a road-agent, and while impersonating the masked Mexican.

He readily found his camp, even in the darkness, and building a fire drew out from among the rocks his treasures, wrapped in a blanket.

All that he had lawlessly taken was there, and after it had been looked over carefully, Mustang Monte giving his explanations so as to insure its return to the real owners, it was securely wrapped up and strapped to the back of Surgeon Powell's saddle.

Then the party mounted again and started for the retreat of Silk Lasso Sam, both Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill feeling the utmost confidence now in the good intentions of the man who was serving as their guide.

After riding a few miles further Mustang Monte halted and said:

"We are not far away now."

"And you wish us to dismount?"

"Yes, Surgeon Powell."

"It will be best to leave the horses here."

"Very well, we will go on foot."

"I have a favor to ask, sir."

"What is it, Mustang Monte?" asked the Surgeon Scout, while Buffalo Bill had his

piercing gaze upon the man, wondering if after all he was going to trick them.

"It is that I go a few steps ahead of you, and when we come in sight of the retreat, that I show myself alone to Silk Lasso Sam."

"Why so?"

"You know that I told you, sir, that he believes that I am dead?"

"Yes."

"Well, sir, I wish him to see me and feel that he is face to face with the man he killed."

"It will be a dangerous thing for you to do."

"I think not, sir."

"He may kill you?"

"I can be ready, sir, to kill him, for I will be prepared and he will be the one surprised."

"You wish him to believe that he has seen a ghost?" said Buffalo Bill.

"That is just it."

"I wish him to feel the torture of beholding what he cannot but believe is my ghost, the spirit of Mustang Monte."

"What do you think of it, Buffalo Bill?"

Buffalo Bill nodded to the Surgeon Scout, as a sign that he wished to speak to him, and the two walked some distance apart.

"Well, Bill?"

"We would not wish to take Silk Lasso Sam a prisoner to the fort, for the colonel to have to hang, and to give his beautiful wife the sorrow of knowing that it must be."

"No, and it will be a good thing if we let Mustang Monte kill him."

"Yes."

"He can do so at the very first indication of hostility on the part of Silk Lasso Sam."

"Yes, he can do that very thing, Frank."

"Very well, I will give Mustang Monte a hint of what is expected of him."

The two friends then returned to where Mustang Monte and Pony Bob were talking together, and the Surgeon Scout said:

"Mustang Monte, you can do as you wish, and go ahead of us to the camp of Silk Lasso Sam."

"Thank you, sir."

"But you must go prepared to act on the instant, to protect your life."

"I will be ready, sir, to kill him if I have to do so, though it would be far better to see him hanged."

"Don't take any chances, for you know he is a desperate man and a dead shot, quick as lightning upon the draw, and he is not one to be easily frightened."

"Very true, sir; but I do wish to have him feel the torture of seeing one whom he believes dead alive again, in spirit form, as he will believe at sight of me."

"All right, go ahead, and we will follow."

Thus urged Mustang Monte moved on ahead of the others, a grim smile upon his face as he felt that he was to confront the man whom he now so bitterly hated.

Ten minutes more and there was the glimmer of a firelight ahead, and creeping cautiously forward all four men soon came in sight of the retreat of Silk Lasso Sam, at the head of a rocky canyon.

"Yes, there he is in his camp."

"Now move ahead, Mustang Monte, and be on the watch, for your own life is in danger."

"We will await you here," said Buffalo Bill, and he gave a sigh of relief to feel that the end of the trail was at hand, that the fugitive outlaw was discovered in his lair.

CHAPTER LXVIII.

RETRIBUTION.

THE masked Mexican sat in his secret retreat, his face now no longer masked.

It was the head of a canyon where he was, and he had made there against the rocks a shelter of brush and leaves.

A fire burned in front of him giving him light, for it was night.

He had eaten his supper, his horse was staked out down the canyon, and outlaw though he was he seemed in no dread of a surprise.

Upon the blanket in front of him he had placed his treasures and miser-like he gloated over them, his face radiant with joy.

He seemed to rejoice in this counting over

of his treasures, unmindful that most of all he had was stained with the life blood of a victim.

"Well, I shall soon have enough gold to give up this life of danger."

"But not yet, not yet, for there is more to get, more to be done," he mused aloud.

"Yes, I wish to get more gold, and I will."

"And in getting gold I will seek revenge, for there is Buffalo Bill to die, and Surgeon Powell, yes and Dean the miner, for my shot was not fatal and he was taken to the fort and still lives."

"I should have been as sure in my aim as I was with Mustang Monte, for he dropped dead at my feet and the wolves soon had his bones well picked."

"He appealed to me for mercy, to my sense of gratitude."

"Bah, what do I know of either?"

"I killed him as I will others whose lives I must have— Oh God!"

The man tried to rise from his blanket, but his legs would not support him.

And no wonder, for there, having glided noiselessly to within a few feet of him, was the form of a man.

It was the form of Mustang Monte.

There he stood in the firelight, his face white as death, every feature plainly seen and the eyes were turned upon the outlaw, the hands clasped and held forth in an appeal for mercy.

To one who felt that he had killed the seeming apparition before him it was an appalling, a terrible sight, enough to madden the brain, to send the spark of life flying away in deadly fright.

In vain did Silk Lasso Sam seek to rise.

His limbs would not support him.

He held out his hands, but they dropped listlessly to his side.

He tried to speak, to cry out, but no word could he utter.

Nearer came the form of Mustang Monte, uttering no word, but now one hand pointed full at the crouching, cowering man upon the blanket, now wholly unmindful of his treasures before him.

The hand of Mustang Monte pointed at him in a threatening way as slowly he drew nearer and nearer.

Silk Lasso Sam writhed in anguish, his eyes started as though they would burst from their sockets, his lips drew hard over his teeth, revealing them in a horrid grin as they chattered together in a chill of terror.

But the avenger had no mercy now.

He saw the man before him whose capture would save his life, the man who had shown him no mercy when appealed to, the man whom he had saved from the cowboys' fury.

He knew, he felt how he suffered, and he was glad to behold him thus writhe in anguish untold, in terror unspeakable.

So he drew nearer step by step until suddenly he dropped his hand lightly upon the quivering form of the outlaw, and said in a deep, sepulchral voice:

"Silk Lasso Sam, Satan has sent me to take you to him for punishment for all your crimes."

"Do you know me, for I am the spirit of the man you so treacherously murdered?"

Then there broke from the lips of the cowering man, a loud, long wail of anguish, and he dropped backward, quivering from head to feet.

Instantly there was heard a voice calling out:

"That cry has made him a madman, or it was his dying utterance."

Then Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill dashed upon the scene.

The former knelt by the side of the outlaw and placed his hand upon his pulse.

Then he rested it over his heart, and next placed his ear to listen for its beating.

The others watched him in silence, for the form was still now, the quivering had ceased.

Presently Surgeon Powell said:

"Mustang Monte, you have had your revenge, and all others he has wronged are avenged, for a more fearful death I never witnessed."

"He was literally frightened to death, a brave man, for brave he was beyond all question, frightened to death, dying in an agony untold."

"Yes, there is no doubt this time, for Silk Lasso Sam is dead."

CHAPTER LXIX.

CONCLUSION.

Yes, there was no doubt this time, as Surgeon Powell had said, for the outlaw was dead at last.

The man who had gone wrong in life from his youth, the man who had seemed to glory in taking the lives of his fellow human beings, who had raised his hand against all, showing mercy to none, had at last died in a way that would cause even his worst foes to pity him.

What if his terror had lasted but a few minutes, it had seemed ages to him.

Like one awaking in his coffin in the grave, he had lived ages in seconds, suffered untold misery in the moments that went by until death came to his release.

The form was wrapped in blankets and placed not far away, for the surgeon and his companions were going to camp there for the night.

But Pony Bob, to be on the safe side, tied his lariat about the dead form, as though fearful Silk Lasso Sam might again escape.

The treasure was gathered up by the surgeon and the scout, and there was found the money belonging to the Government, and jewels taken from Ruth and others, with much more of value.

Money which it was known Silk Lasso Sam had had when captured, was, according to the compact, given to Mustang Monte, who thus secured a considerable sum along with what had been taken from him when the outlaw had robbed him.

Mustang Monte was too anxious to get away to remain all night in camp with the others, and so, after warmly thanking Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill for their kindness to him, he mounted his horse and rode away in the darkness, to be no more heard of upon the Northern frontier.

Soon after his departure Pony Bob was sent to call into the fort the two men who had been with Buffalo Bill, and strapping the body of the dead outlaw upon his horse, the surgeon and the scout started for Pioneer Post, going by the trails which would cause them to pass the camps of Texas Jack and Wild Bill.

The next afternoon General Dunwoody received a note which caused him to at once seek his wife.

"Ruth, my wife, I have news from Cody."

"Yes."

"He tells me that he is waiting a few miles from the fort and has the body of Silk Lasso Sam, which he begs to know if you wish to see, that you may satisfy yourself that there is no mistake?"

"Then he is dead?" Ruth asked in a low tone.

"Yes, his note so says."

"How did he die?"

"Cody writes that he will explain all when he sees us, and that Surgeon Powell is with him."

"I will go."

"It will be best, for then your mind will be forever at rest regarding him."

"And you may send men to bury him there, for it will be better so."

An hour after General Dunwoody and Ruth, guided by the scout who had brought the note to the fort, rode up to where Surgeon Powell and Buffalo Bill awaited them, the rest of the scouts being camped some hundreds of yards distant.

"This time there is no mistake, general," said Buffalo Bill, and Surgeon Powell led the way to where lay the dead form enveloped in a blanket.

The blanket was drawn from the face and then was revealed the brother of Ruth Leigh, the man who was known as Silk Lasso Sam.

Ruth's hand rested gently upon the forehead, and from her lips softly fell the words:

"Yes, it is my poor, poor brother."

"He is dead now, and death has wiped out the past."

"Good-by forever, brother Arden."

She knelt and imprinted a kiss upon the forehead and then, without a word turned and walked quickly to her horse.

The general raised her to her saddle, while Surgeon Powell said:

"Let me tell you, Mrs. Dunwoody, that I was right in my surmise, for Mustang Monte aided your brother to escape death."

"Silk Lasso Sam proved a traitor to him,"

and Mustang Monte was the masked Mexican Number Two.

"Buffalo Bill tracked Monte down, captured him, and he was allowed to go free when he led us to the retreat of Silk Lasso Sam."

"It was Mustang Monte who was the cause of his death, and he has gone his way."

"Here, general, is the treasure taken from the outlaw, and we leave all in your keeping, for much of it belongs to your wife, Mrs. Caruth and others."

"We will bury the body and follow on to the fort."

Ruth made no reply, but in token that she held no ill-will against either the Surgeon Scout or Buffalo Bill, she held forth her hand in silence, first to one, then the other.

Then she and the general rode back to the fort, a scout carrying the blanket roll of treasure.

The next morning the news was made known through the fort that Silk Lasso Sam had been captured and killed by Buffalo Bill and his men, but the true story of the affair no one seemed to get at the truth of, for all who did know had been pledged to keep the secret.

General Dunwoody soon after made application to be transferred to another command, for he was anxious to remove his wife from scenes where she had known so much of sorrow.

When they did leave, Deadshot Dean the miner accompanied them, fully restored to health, and also able to carry with him considerable riches to the wife and son he loved so well.

The other characters of my story, however, still remained upon the frontier, to do the duties devolving upon them, and where the career of Frank Powell the Surgeon Scout, and Buffalo Bill and his Merry Men, made records that will send their names down into history as brave heroes of the plains.

THE END.

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98 William Street, New York.

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ENTERED AS SECOND CLASS MATTER AT THE NEW YORK, N. Y., POST OFFICE.

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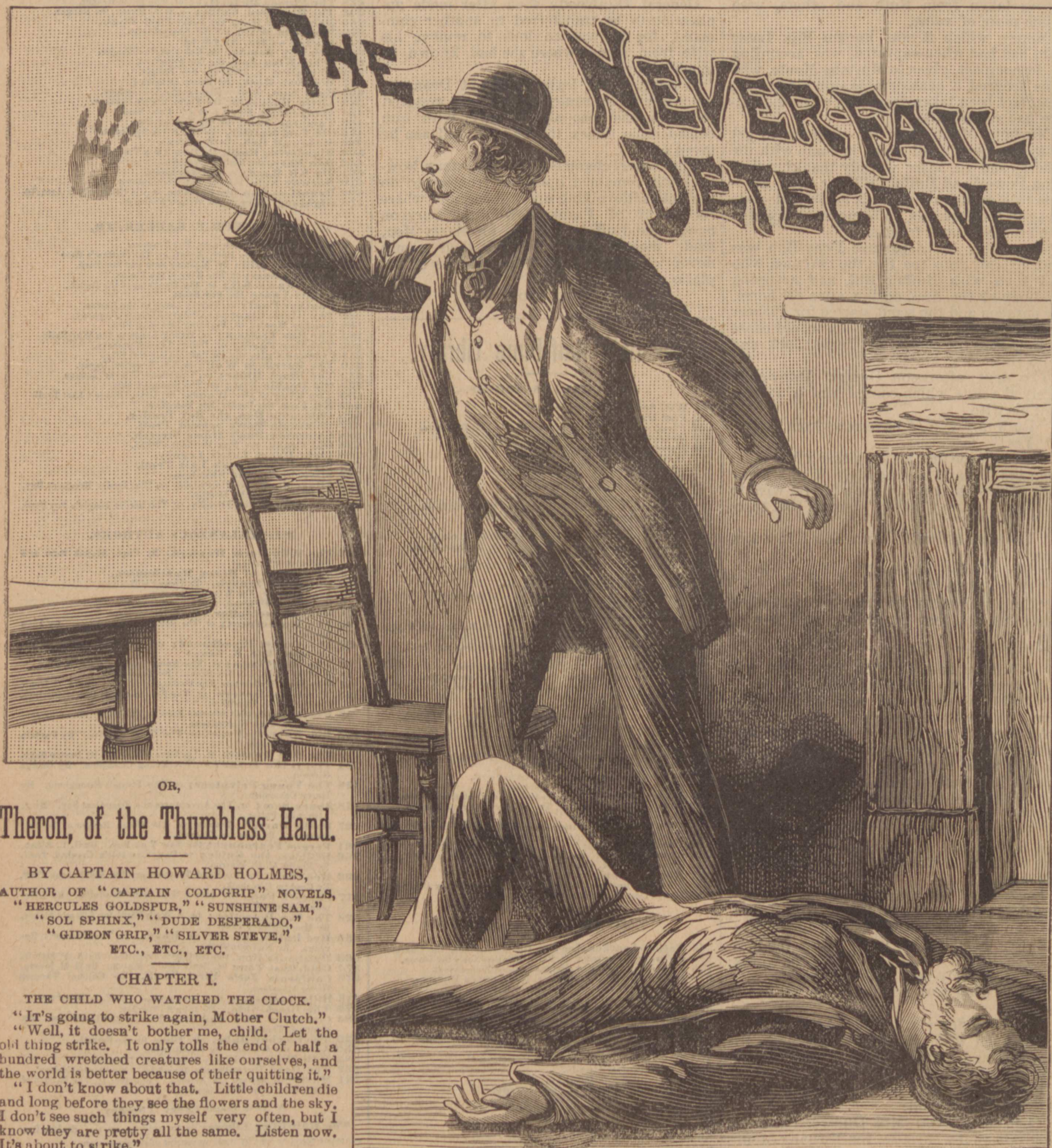
No. 736.

Published Every
Wednesday.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year.

Vol. LVII.



OR,
Theron, of the Thumbless Hand.

BY CAPTAIN HOWARD HOLMES,
AUTHOR OF "CAPTAIN COLDGRIP" NOVELS,
"HERCULES GOLDSBUR," "SUNSHINE SAM,"
"SOL SPHINX," "DUDE DESPERADO,"
"GIDEON GRIP," "SILVER STEVE,"
ETC., ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

THE CHILD WHO WATCHED THE CLOCK.

"It's going to strike again, Mother Clutch."
"Well, it doesn't bother me, child. Let the old thing strike. It only tells the end of half a hundred wretched creatures like ourselves, and the world is better because of their quitting it."
"I don't know about that. Little children die and long before they see the flowers and the sky. I don't see such things myself very often, but I know they are pretty all the same. Listen now. It's about to strike."

The woman called Mother Clutch looked up and glanced at the old clock which stood on the

THAT BLOODY IMPRINT ON THE WALL FOR A MOMENT DREW THE DETECTIVE FROM
THE DEAD MAN ON THE FLOOR.

shelf nailed to the wall of the wretched room, and, while it struck eleven, turned her eyes to the child, who was listening with a sudden ray of light on the face usually sad.

For months the little one's occupation was watching the clock and waiting for its musical strokes.

This seemed to be all the happiness she had and she never varied it between the four smoky walls which she called home.

The scene was the back room of one of the hundreds of tenements that dot the great metropolis—a room which was the living apartment of the two thus strangely thrown together. Little Tina and Mother Clutch were not relatives; there was nothing about them to even suggest such a thing.

Fate and poverty had thrown them together. The one had picked up the other and the child had gone home with the woman who was to become her guardian and, at last, her real friend.

Mother Clutch lived in the room where the child had listened to the clock. No one seemed to know what she did for a living; she went out now and then but never in the garish light of day. She glided down the dark streets when the city was wrapped in night and when the silent and motionless figures of its blue-coated guardians were not as wary as they should be.

Some called Mother Clutch a gutter scavenger; others, who saw her for a few seconds as she showed her poorly-robed body in the lamp-light, took her for a lineal descendant of the Witch of Endor; but all avoided her.

The room where the pair lived had but one window and it looked out upon a house which stood so close to theirs that one might have crawled from that very window to the one nearest it by aid of a ladder. This other house was a tall affair like the tenement where Mother Clutch and her protegee lived, and the window opposite theirs had a strange charm for the child.

Night after night little Tina had seen a face at that window. She had noticed that it was the face of a man who had passed middle age and who looked sorrowful and sad of countenance.

On this particular night, and when the clock had tolled off the hour, Tina turned and ran to the window.

The eyes of the old woman followed her with a watchful smile.

"Is he there, Tina?" she asked.

"No, mother, he isn't there. I don't see him at all and you know he has stood at the window for I don't know how long and looked at me while I watched the clock."

"He's busy, perhaps."

"But, what does he do? He never seems to be busy at anything, but I can't see him now."

The old woman who was mending a rough garment at the table bent over her work and bit off the thread. Then she turned the garment and began to sew at another place.

"He must be one of the dead people you have just talked about," remarked the child, turning from the window and watching the woman as if expecting some attention.

"What, the man over there? Pish! child; he's never going to die. You don't know yet that people who have the leanest and saddest of faces really live the longest. By the way, you haven't found out his name yet."

Tina laughed.

"I saw him at the window last night while you were out and tried to talk with him."

"Well?"

"He didn't care to say anything, and when I asked him what he did in that house and who he was, he closed the window and vanished."

"That shows that he wants no one to interfere with his business," smiled the old woman. "You'll not ask him again, eh, child?"

"I don't know, but I would like to find out something about him."

"When did you see him last?"

"When the clock had struck ten."

"An hour ago?"

"Yes, mother."

"Was he at the window?"

"His face was pressed against the pane and he seemed to be watching the clock with me. He can hear it from his room—I am sure he can—for he is always at the window while it strikes, just as if he delighted to hear the strokes."

Little Tina lingered at the sill upon which she could barely rest her arms and the old woman went on with her work.

"There he is!" Tina suddenly cried. "I see—No, it is not the man I have seen there, but some one else! Look how his shadow falls on the wall! Quick, Mother Clutch! You want to see that man, I never saw him before."

The child's manner startled Mother Clutch, and she threw down her work and leaned toward the window.

"You are too late. The man is gone now. He passed the window and vanished. I saw him for a moment, a tall-looking man with a hand that rested on the wall. See! The hand has left a heavy dark place on the wall. I see the fingers, and, what is so curious, there is no thumb!"

Mother Clutch now opened the window and leaned over the sill.

From the alley far below came the sounds of night traffic. It was nearing midnight and the only thing seen in the upper world was the head of Mother Clutch as she tried to look into the room opposite her own.

"See the hand—on the wall, mother!" cried the child, still excited and pale. "It is there where the man left it. Don't you see the marks of the fingers? But, where is the thumb?"

The old woman turned to the child, at whose face she gazed a moment without speaking.

"Are you sure you saw a man in the room yonder?" she asked at length.

"Indeed I did, mother. He was a tall man for he stooped as he crossed the room toward the door, and when he took his hand away from the wall there was a dark spot there."

"I see it! It looks something like a human hand but—"

"It has no thumb."

"True; I can't see any," admitted the old night prowler.

Mother Clutch closed the window and for some time stood undecided in the middle of the chamber. She was alone with her protegee, and the hands of the clock were creeping round the dial toward the hour of midnight.

"Can you remain here alone, Tina?" she asked.

"Why can't I?" piped the little one. "You have left me here before now and I'm not afraid of ghosts and such things."

"I thought you were not. I will be back presently. I won't be gone very long."

"And I will watch the clock till it strikes again," smiled Tina. "I will pass the time away as best I can. But are you going to look after the man who left the print of his hand on Mr. Mystery's wall?"

"Not I," answered Mother Clutch with a perceptible shudder. "It is none of my business whose hand it is. We don't know that man and he certainly has never cared to know us."

"But he seemed to take delight in looking into our room," interrupted the little one. "Why, Mother Clutch, I have seen him looking in at all hours, and once when I opened my eyes on the bed with the sunlight streaming into the room, he had his window up, and I caught him there, eyeing me in a very strange manner. I would like to know—"

"I guess it isn't any of our business," and the next moment the old protector was gone.

Tina turned again to the window.

The Unknown had a curtain which he always drew to before retiring, but it had been open all the evening, as if he was still up.

The light in the room was so placed as to throw upon the wall opposite the stranger's window any figure which might come between it and the window. Little Tina had never crossed the threshold of the Unknown's room, but she fancied that the light came from a lamp on a table which she could not see, and that, being there, it could throw upon the wall the pantomimic shadows she had sometimes seen.

When Mother Clutch had taken her departure the child, for want of something better to do, turned to the window and fell to watching the singular impression on the wall.

Her eyes were as bright as they were blue, and she saw distinctly the hand which some one had left on the white wall. It had no thumb, as she had declared to Mother Clutch, and it was the absence of that member which had startled Tina and opened her eyes with excitement.

Riveted to the window by that hand, as it were, she stood there and never heard the clock ticking on its shelf behind her. She did not know that the hands were almost together and that in a few minutes the hour of twelve would be struck.

Suddenly the clear tones of the clock rung out and Tina turned and watched it while they filled the room with their sound. The clock had fascinated the child for many months; but now it seemed to strike with a funeral cadence that sunk like lead into her soul.

"I wonder if he heard that?" cried Tina, whirling toward the window of "Mr. Mystery's" room.

What she saw at that moment almost froze her blood.

A hand was drawing the curtain to!

It was not the long hand of the man whom she had watched so long at the window. It was not the hand which he had rested on the panes until she seemed to look through the fingers and at the wall beyond.

No, it was a hand heavier than his; it was a hand which was strange to little Tina—a hand which she had seen, but once before and that was when it left its mark on the wall.

In short, it was a hand without a thumb; it was a hand which seemed to photograph itself on the child's brain. Somehow or other, young as she was, she believed that it was to have an important bearing on her own life. She appeared to feel the touch of that thumbless member, as if fate had brought it to her for her own destruction, and yet she had never dreamed of an enemy.

The curtain was pulled to while Tina watched the operation.

Then the hand vanished and no longer ap-

peared on the wall, for the closing of the curtain shut off that sight.

For a moment there was a shadow on the ceiling in the room opposite, a shadow that crept toward one corner and went out of existence, and while Tina looked, the room became dark as if some one had suddenly blown out the light.

"I wonder who is in there with the strange man?" cried Tina. "And what are they doing together?"

She was answered in a singular manner.

The door opened and Mother Clutch re-entered.

The little clock-watcher was about to spring toward her with an exclamation when she saw that her guardian was not alone.

Mother Clutch held up one hand in token of silence and when the man who was her companion, had entered, she carefully closed the door.

This man was a handsome, thin-faced person of five and thirty, and Tina thought his eyes were very piercing and almost fascinating.

"This is Mr. Fox, child," explained Mother Clutch. "I know him and he knows me, ha, ha! I went out to find him, to show him the hand on the wall in Mr. Mystery's room. Where is it? What, is the room dark?"

"Yes, that very hand which has no thumb drew the curtain and then put out the light—I'm quite sure it did," cried Tina. "The gentleman can see for himself that the room is dark."

The man turned to the window and looked toward the opposite window.

"That looks like ugly work, eh, Ford?" remarked Mother Clutch.

Whatever the man thought, he said nothing; but Tina looked at him, as if in a flash she had discovered that he was a detective—one of the men who give the criminals of New York no peace.

CHAPTER II.

JORAL THE SERPENT-SELLER.

IN another part of the city and many a square from the scene of the events we have just recorded lived a man who was wanted out of the immediate neighborhood by those who surrounded him.

This obnoxious person's name was Joral Jet. He had a dark face and two little Hindoo-like eyes that glittered like the orbs of the strange things in which he dealt.

Joral was a dealer in snakes; that is, he kept nearly all kinds of reptiles for sale, and now and then one of his pets would get away and create consternation throughout the neighborhood.

Some of these serpents were harmless and beautiful; others were beautiful without being so harmless. They were kept in wire and glass cages in the room where the man slept, and he fed them without the slightest fear, running his dark hand among them and even taking the deadliest from the cages.

Joral had come from India. He had been an inhabitant of America for ten years, and his trade had always been the handling of serpents.

No wonder the people who were forced to live near him wanted him to move away, and no wonder they killed every snake that escaped, despite the old man's assertions that they were harmless. Woe to the boar that sought their liberty and left the premises! Woe to the little green snakes, that were almost as thin as hairs, if they fell in the way of Joral's neighbors!

It was nine o'clock on the night we are dealing with when the door of the old Indian's den opened and a man looked in. The old man started up and smiled. Perhaps he had been looking for this particular customer, for he seemed to smile, if the movement of his dark lips could be construed into a smile; and, a minute later, he was sitting on the stool in the room of his pets, watching his caller from the doorway of his scintillant eyes.

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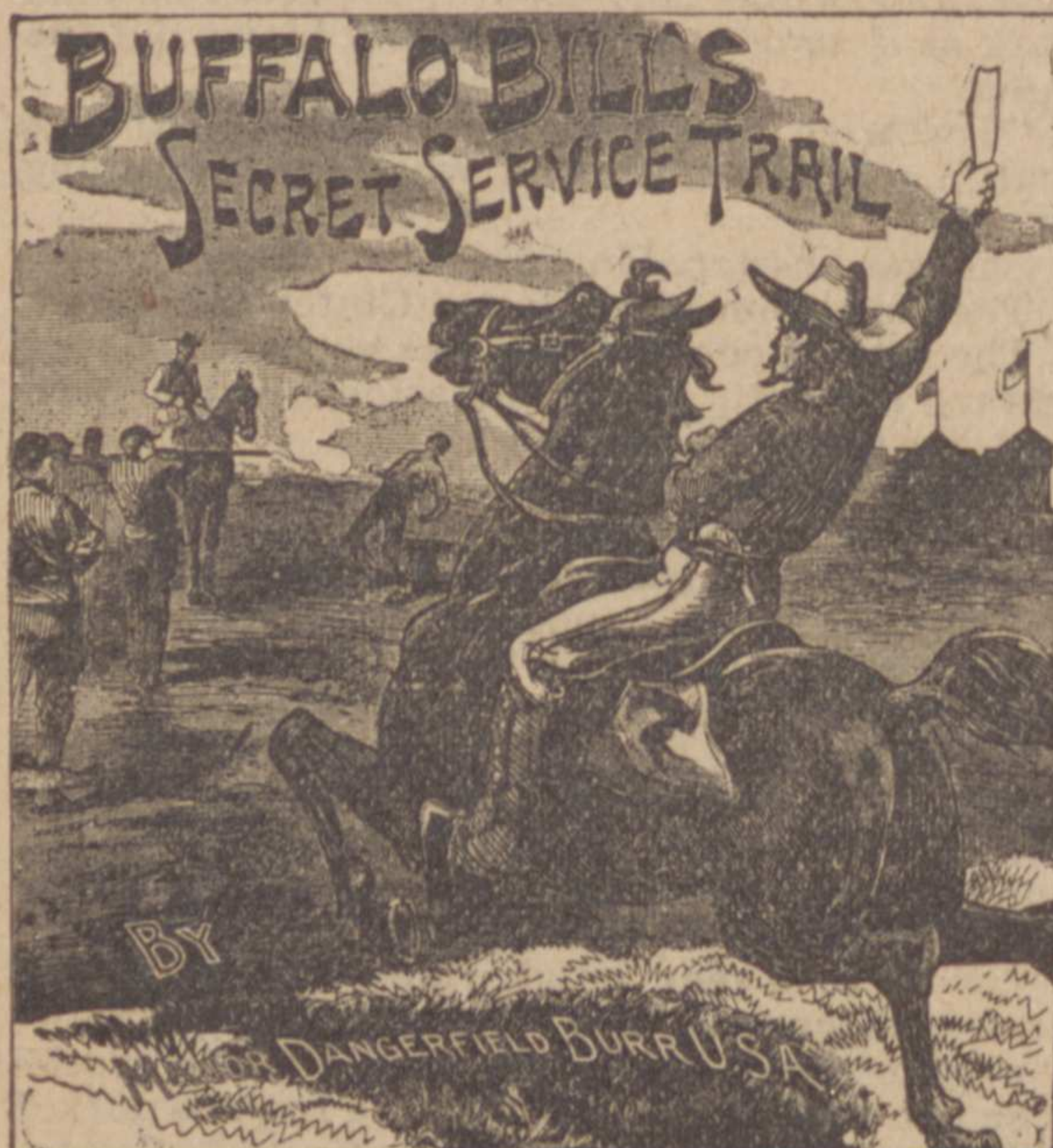
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